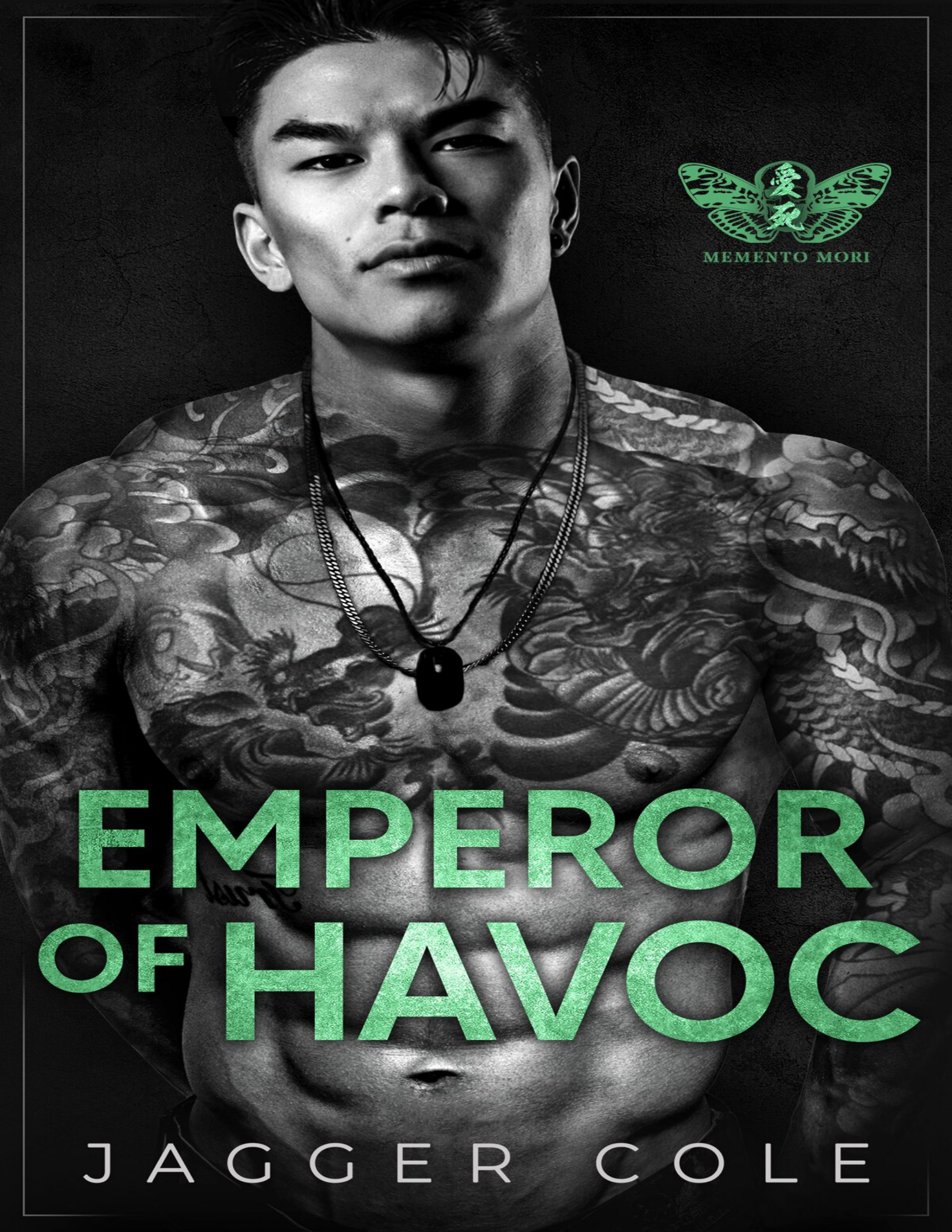

MEMENTO MORI
EMPEROR OF HAVOC
JAGGER COLE

EMPEROR OF HAVOC

A DARK FORCED MARRIAGE MAFIA ROMANCE

JAGGER COLE

OceanofPDF.com

Emperor of Havoc
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Deviant Hearts
Also by Jagger Cole
About the Author

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TRIGGER WARNING

Dear Reader,

This book contains darker themes and depictions of past trauma, as well as graphic scenes involving primal, CNC, and somno activities.

While these scenes were written to create a more vivid, in-depth story, they may be triggering to some readers. *Please* know your own triggers, and read with that in mind.

Thanks for reading,

Jagger

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1

KATARINA

KAIJU

You're already mine, sweetheart. You just don't know it yet.

MERCIFULLY, the mask covers the blush that stains my cheeks as I reread the words.

KAIJU

Once we begin, there'll be no escaping me. I'm the monster you can't outrun. And when I catch you, I'm going to fucking ruin you.

The message from the appropriately named "Kaiju" glares up at me from my phone, sharp and menacing like the edge of a blade, making my heart hammer in my chest.

It's not as though I've never heard crude talk from a man before…not when in most cases, my father is both his boss and worst nightmare. Men in our world—the underworld, that is—have a *habit* of speaking crudely. So it's not like my eyes and ears are so pure and virginal that reading Kaiju's messages should throw me into a tizzy or anything.

And yet…*it does*.

Not "a tizzy", *per se*. I'm not sure anyone's been in "a tizzy" since the forties. But still, every time I reread the line, my face throbs a little hotter.

My pulse skips a little faster.

Darkness wraps its clawed hands around my neck and squeezes a little more dangerously.

Temptingly.

Outside the Sensoji Temple at the Hagoita-Ichi Fair, the crowd bustles around me, coming and going with waves of laughter and chatter. Lanterns cast their golden glow over the streets and the holiday stalls, and the air is thick with the aroma of grilled fish and sweet azuki bean paste. I should be blending in, just another reveler in a *tengu*, *oni*, or *kitsune* mask.

But I'm not here for the traditional year-end holiday festivities.

So what exactly ARE you here for?

My face throbs again as some shred of whatever sanity I have left demands to be heard. Once again, I'm thankful for the *kabuki* -style mask I'm wearing, hiding the heat in my cheeks as my eyes furtively dip back to the Club Venom app open on my phone.

Just like the first time I visited, it's like lifting the lid of Pandora's box.

Even though it's half a world away, in New York, I've heard whispers about it here in Tokyo: a notorious club that caters to the rich, powerful, dark, and insanely deviant. When Nina told me about it months ago, it was in hushed tones, her eyes wide and face close to mine, as if she was sharing some scandalous gossip with me.

"*It's a SEX CLUB, Kat. Like, a kink club for mafia types. Apparently, it caters to people with* super *kinky tastes, too."*

I swear I can still taste the shame on my tongue when I'd asked her "what type of kinks".

"*Dunno*," she'd shrugged. "*My cousin Mara was telling me about it. But, like, real kinky shit. Bondage, S&M, even non-con stuff."*

For the eleventy millionth time tonight, I'm grateful for the mask covering my face as I replay that first conversation that led me here, to the very brink of my sanity.

I shouldn’t like what I like.

I shouldn’t want the things I want.

I shouldn’t have these sorts of urges.

But I do.

And at times, keeping them bottled up so tightly, buried so deep inside, is almost too much to take. Like I’m sitting on a live grenade about to go off and blast my dirty secrets all over the fucking room.

So that’s why I finally…did it.

While physically located in New York, Club Venom offers an online matching service, sort of like Tinder on steroids, for like-minded, kinky fucks like—well, *me*, I guess. I chickened out midway through the application process seven times in a row before I finally took their guarantee of confidentiality to heart, powered through my shame, and hit the submit button.

I was granted membership within a day.

I created my “Snowflake” profile a week later, listing my kinks, interests, and what I was looking for in a potential partner.

Tall. Athletic. Dark tastes like mine.

A willingness to overlook the annoying little detail that they’d be helping me lose my virginity at the age of twenty-two to a supremely fucked-up rape kink fantasy.

I…might have omitted the last part.

They don’t need to know that.

And that’s what brings me to the Hagoita-Ichi Fair tonight, masked, waiting to meet the *ridiculously* appropriately named “Kaiju”. When little ole me posted my interest in getting chased down like prey and forced, just about every Club Venom member in Japan responded.

But none of them caught my attention like him.

Kaiju.

That’s Japanese for “strange beast” or “giant monster”.

We’ve never met. But even just talking to him, seeing pictures of him—wearing a terrifying *oni* demon mask—I knew.

My darkness craves a monster, and I truly found one in him.

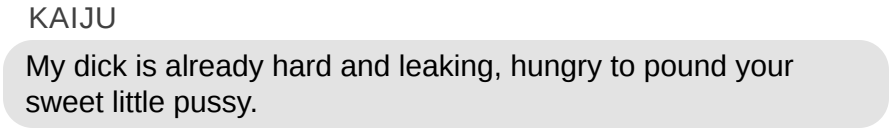
And tonight, he’s either going to destroy me, or give me the most memorable night of my life.

The rational part of my brain keeps saying that this is merely a pressure release. This is me uncorking the bottle with the demons inside me and letting them out to play for a while before the bottle is sealed back up.

Tonight is about me jumping into the deep end and seeing if I sink or swim. After that, I can go back to my intricately woven Yakuza world. Back to the carefully orchestrated dance I do to help my father lead, even though a woman “has no place” at that table.

I mean, fuck that.

My phone buzzes in my hand. Adrenaline spikes through me, physically jolting me as I glance down at the screen, and my throat tightens.



I mean *Jesus*. Sell the fantasy much?

A cold shiver ripples up my spine, raw need pulsing and throbbing deep in my core and my pulse ringing loudly in my ears as I suck my bottom lip between my teeth.

I’m about to reply when my phone buzzes again. This time, it’s not a notification from the Venom app. It’s a regular text. When I see who it’s from, my body stiffens.

HIGASHI

Just confirmed. Initiation is TONIGHT. 11pm at the new Mori-kai compound. Initiates will enter using the back door on Sugiiru street. Black hoodie and sweats. Good luck.

Something vicious drags down my spine.

Fuck.

Zero part of this plan is a good idea, or even vaguely north of “a supremely shitty idea”.

But this is what winning a war takes, even if that war is currently of the “cold” type. Just because I’m the daughter of a Yakuza *Oyabun* with ties to the Russian Bratva, it doesn’t mean I’m a fucking princess. It means I’m every bit the warlord my father is. And if I can sneak behind enemy lines to get intel on how the Mori-kai are trying to infiltrate *our* city, I’m going to do it.

Except that means I can't dance this dance of madness tonight with Kaiju.

I won’t lie: a small part of me is kinda relieved. Like I’ve looked over the edge, seen how far down it actually is, and decided not to go base-jumping today.

I frown as I pull up the Venom app again and type out a reply to him.

SNOWFLAKE

Huge apologies, but I have to cancel tonight. I’m here, but I just got word this second about some family stuff I need to take care of. I’m SO sorry to do this last minute.

Kaiju doesn’t respond. Which, to be fair, seems super on-brand for a man who calls himself “strange beast” or “giant monster” and promises to “ruin me”.

I frown as I stare at the screen again. Still no reply.

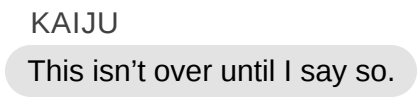
SNOWFLAKE

I’m really sorry to do this to you!

I exhale as I start to make my way through the crowd, texting Okita, my driver, to come meet me.

Another buzz from my phone has me pausing to look at the screen.

Instantly, my heart skips a beat.



* * *

MY FAMILY, the Ishida-kai, has unquestionably ruled the Tokyo criminal underground for decades, ever since my father Kolya came back to Japan from his exile in Russia to claim what was his. Recently, however, our hold on this city has been…challenged.

Apparently deciding Kyoto wasn't enough for them, the Mori-kai has recently expanded in a large way into Tokyo, helped by their treaty with the Nikolayev Bratva. Not long ago, it appeared we were looking at actual, blood-in-the-streets war with them. But then cooler heads prevailed, and the conflict was "downgraded" to a Cold War.

But I've read my history books, and I know how Cold Wars are won.

With spies.

Which is exactly what I am tonight.

Okita is loyal enough to not ask awkward questions like "Why are we stopping at a clothing store to buy a men's black hoodie and black sweatpants?" Just the same, I have him drop me off ten blocks from my actual destination.

I walk the rest of the way to the vast compound that the Mori-kai have recently moved into. When I'm near, I pull my coppery blonde hair into a tight bun and yank up my hood, covering my face enough to—hopefully—conceal both my gender and my race.

Dad is half-Japanese, half-Russian. My mother was all Russian. Needless to say, my hair color, gray eyes, and unquestionably Caucasian skin don't exactly do much to help me pass for a young Japanese man looking for a potential gig with the Mori-kai.

But Higashi, my secret source within the Mori-kai organization, also told me that the initiation tonight also has all the initiates wearing masks. So when I finally get to the street that runs behind the Mori-kai compound, all I have to do is keep my hood up and my head down as I join the line of other initiates at the back door.

When it opens, a big, surly-looking Japanese guy steps out and immediately jams an e-cigarette between his lips, sucking greedily.

“Listen up,” he growls in Japanese. “My name is Kai, but that doesn’t matter. All that matters is for you all to fucking listen, follow directions, and shut the fuck up. Any questions?”

“Yeah—”

Before the guy can actually *voice* his question, Kai strides over, grabs him, and physically hurls him halfway across the street.

“Out. Don’t ever come back. Hopefully that answers your question.”

The rest of us stare as the guy with the question picks himself off the ground, glances at Kai, then turns and scurries off into the night.

“Anyone else have a question?”

Nah, I’m good.

Kai slips back through the door and the initiates follow him, one by one. A man just inside the dimly lit hallway hands out blank black *oni* masks. I quickly slip mine on, finally able to raise my head a little more without giving away my identity.

Inside, the air is thick with anticipation. We’re led down a flight of stairs into a *huge* basement the size of professional basketball court. The only illumination comes from dim lights set into the floor at the base of the stone walls, making it feel like we’re in an old dungeon. What look like wrestling mats cover the concrete floors, and a raised stage lords it over the whole scene from the far wall.

The initiates form uneasy clusters, everyone’s nervous energy crackling like static.

Thud.

Thud.

Thud.

A hush falls over the room as the sound, coming from the shadows of the stage, echoes throughout the room.

Thud.

Thud.

Thud.

My blood runs cold as a figure emerges from the gloom—a huge, towering, menacing figure, shirtless, with swirling *irezumi*-style tattoo ink covering his broad chest, bulging arms, and chiseled abs.

A man wearing a terrifying *oni* mask, the carved demon's grin leering at us as he taps the baseball bat in his powerful grip on the floor.

Thud.

Thud.

Thud.

Finally, the tapping stops and he comes to a halt at the front of the stage, facing us all.

"Welcome," his voice rumbles, slicing through the silence like a blade. "Tonight, we separate the worthy from the weak."

The crowd tenses, and I feel the weight of his gaze sweeping over us. My heartbeat thumps in my ears, but I remain still.

This is why I'm here: to take mental notes. To understand how our enemies are building strength within *our* city while this Cold War hangs over our heads.

The man in the *oni* mask leers at us. He's not commanding the room.

He's *owning* it.

Without warning, he jumps off the stage into the crowd. The first row of initiates gasps and shuffles back, making room for him. Malevolence swirls around him like a black cloud as he moves. I'm shorter than most of the men around me so I lose sight of him as he begins to prowl through the initiates.

"When I say so, you'll all square off with the man standing closest to you. Don't make it a fucking ordeal. Just find someone. But choose wisely, because when I give the word, you'll be fighting this person."

My pulse skips.

Wait, what?

"And when I say fight, I mean you'll fucking *fight*, like your life depended on it. The fight will continue until one of you either taps out or blacks out. Is that clear?"

Everyone around me nods nervously. I grit my teeth, swallowing as I ball my hands into fists.

I've taken various hand-to-hand fighting classes my entire life. But still. Higashi didn't mention this part.

Without warning, my phone vibrates against my hip. I pull it out discreetly and glance at the screen.

KAIJU

You're not supposed to be here.

For a split second, my whole world freezes. An icy chill drags its claws over my skin, and nauseating dread settles deep in my stomach.

What. The. Fuck.

My phone buzzes again.

KAIJU

Black hoodies really aren't your look.

My fingers shake as I tap on the Venom app preferences, my pulse jangling as my eyes scan down the list.

Oh, shit.

The toggle next to “share location with matched partner” is set to “always”.

My face pales.

I remember choosing this setting when I was first looking for…well, what I was on the Club Venom app to find: someone to chase me. To hunt me, pin me down, and fuck me like an animal. Someone to tap into the darkest recesses of the fantasies in my head, even just once.

But I'd forgotten it was toggled on until just now.

My eyes land on the fine print underneath the setting: *location settings are accurate to within two feet*.

My throat tightens.

He knows.

Not only does he know I’m here at this initiation. He knows *which of the initiates* I am. And the second I think that, my brain connects the final dots with horrifying clarity: it means *he’s here too*.

A brutal chill ripples through me as I turn quietly, glancing left and right at the men standing near me.

“Choose your partner now.”

The voice rips me out of my horrified stupor, yanking my attention to the savage-looking tattooed man with the bat slowly prowling down the row of initiates in front of me. He’s seriously *huge*, towering above all the others as his blank, masked eyes sweep the crowd.

“Hey, pay the fuck attention.”

I flinch, ripping my gaze to the person standing next to me, dressed all in black just like me, with the blank black *oni* mask. All around us the others are pairing off, facing each other as they get ready.

Shit, this is happening.

I swallow as I move into a fighting stance, bringing up my fists. The man opposite me is only a little taller than I am but definitely has some bulk to him.

“Tap out now,” he growls, “and I won’t break you.”

Fifteen years of karate, jiu jitsu, and aikido, I think silently to myself. *Let’s do this, bitch*.

“What’s the matter,” my opponent snickers. “Too scared to say anything? Tap out, pussy. Save me the effo—”

“Fight!”

The second the huge, masked leader barks the word, I’m hurling myself at the man facing me. I hear a gasp of shock from behind his mask as I slam into him, grappling at his arm and twisting as I jam my foot between his and then roll forward. The momentum knocks him off his feet, sending him hurtling over my shoulder and slamming into the floor mats.

All around us, pairs of initiates roar and grunt, hitting, fighting and kicking. My pulse roars as my opponent groans and tries to get up.

He doesn’t make it.

In one move, I’ve got him flipped face down, my knee in the small of his back and my arm wrapped around his neck. He kicks and flails, cursing me in a ragged, choked voice as he gasps for air.

Tap out. Tap the fuck out.

His palm slaps the mat, over and over.

Yes.

I’m obviously not *actually* here to try and join the Mori-kai. But still. There's a smug smile on my face behind my mask as I let go of him and stand, victorious.

“Fuck that,” the man on the ground wheezes, sucking in ragged breaths. “I want another—”

“You’re done.”

My blood feels like it runs slower and colder when I hear his voice behind me, his black, malevolent presence swirling around me like toxic smoke.

I'm still frozen as he moves past me, his powerful bare arm brushing my shoulder as he looms over the man on the ground.

"You," he grunts, pointing his bat at the guy. "You're done. Leave."

"But—"

"Or *I* can fight you, and I promise, I won't stop when you tap out like a pussy."

In seconds, my opponent is scrambling to his feet, bowing at the man in the mask, then hurrying toward the stairs.

The tall, built guy with the terrifying mask and the bat doesn't move. I stand there, a shudder creeping up my spine as the other fights play out around us. I watch his back muscles flex as he lifts his arm, resting the bat on one muscled, tattooed shoulder.

Then slowly, he turns.

Jesus.

Even masked, making me unable to see his eyes, the sheer violence and brutal coldness in him lances right into my soul as he turns to level his blank gaze at me. His head tips slowly to the side, sending another cold, vicious shiver rippling through my body.

The seconds tick by. The sound of grunts and fists hitting flesh around us recede, until it's just he and I.

"Come."

The word hits me like a slap, shaking me out of my stupor. He turns and I follow, my pulse roaring in my ears as we slip past scrabbling, fighting duos and men lying groaning on the ground. The man with the bat opens a door set into the wall, near the stage. He doesn't hold it for me or usher me in first. He just steps through into pitch blackness, his pure, venomous power drawing me after him. There's no other option but to follow.

Or else.

The door is already slowly swinging shut when I step forward, pushing it open again and stepping after him.

Then the door closes with a heavy click and pure darkness engulfs us, like the deepest part of the ocean, crushing me under its weight.

Silence pulses in the air.

“You’re not an initiate.”

His voice is low and cold with a dark, sultry tone. And he’s speaking English, with a cultured, upper-class British accent.

My throat bobs.

“I’ll take your silence as an admission of fact,” he growls.

I shudder as I feel him move slowly around behind me. Something touches me in the darkness, making me flinch—his bat, lightly running across the small of my back.

“And you’re a *woman*.”

My breath catches.

“You disappointed me earlier, Snowflake,” he murmurs quietly. I freeze.

“But since you went to such lengths to seek me out anyway, I’ll assume that means you’re *desperate* for me to follow through with my…”

I shudder when I feel his breath in my ear.

“*Promises*. So here’s what’s going to happen.”

My eyes widen, my blood turning to ice as a large, powerful hand wraps around my throat from behind.

“You’re going to *run*, little prey,” he growls. “And I’m going to chase you. And catch you. And when I do…” Excited darkness explodes through my soul as pain cuts into the side of my neck.

I think he just fucking BIT me.

“I’m going to fuck you. Hard. Without mercy. Until I’ve fucking *ruined you*.”

The hand slips from my neck. His presence recedes, slowly melting into the darkness around me.

“So, little prey…” the voice murmurs from the abyss.

“*Run*.”

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2

KATARINA

FOR A MOMENT TIME stops and the world goes still. I stand on the brink, staring into the abyss.

Run.

This is what I've wanted, right? What I've secretly ached for in the darkest parts of the night, in the most shadowy corners of my thoughts.

To be chased. To be caught, forced, and brutalized, even if I say no. *Especially* if I say no.

And yes, I'm aware of how supremely, utterly *fucked* that is.

There's a sickness in wanting things you're not supposed to want. A twisting, gnawing hunger that makes you question everything you think you are. I shouldn't crave the rush of danger. The sharp edge of surrender. I shouldn't need to feel powerless to remember that I actually have control.

But I do.

The shame comes later, like clockwork, wrapping around my ribs, suffocating and unrelenting, whispering that I'm wrong. *Flawed*.

But desire doesn't care about shame. It slithers past logic, past control. It finds the darkest recesses of your psyche and lights them on fire, daring you to touch the flame.

My whole life, I've behaved as I should. Been who I should. A perfect daughter. A warrior. A dutiful soldier in my father's empire.

This forbidden desire feels like rebellion, taking back a piece of myself no one else can touch. It feels like freedom. And maybe that's why I can't let it go, even if the shame that comes with it burns me alive.

I don't know where these desires came from. There's no single memory or moment I can point to, no clear reason why I crave the very thing I should fear. The hunger is just *there*, insatiable and unrelenting, whispering to me in the quiet corners of my mind.

Maybe it's tied to my silence, when my voice was stripped from me so long ago. Maybe it's tied to the parts of me I've locked away—the memories of that basement, of the cold, dark shadows, and to the thought that I'd never come out of that place.

Or maybe I was born broken.

Honestly, I don't want to unravel it, untangle the wires of my desires or dissect the why. I just want to feel. To be unmade. To let go of the control I've clung to so tightly, and in doing so, maybe find something deeper, something real.

This is why I signed up for the Club Venom app. Why I sought out a deviant presence like "Kaiju" and told him—a complete stranger—my most fucked-up fantasies, and precisely how I wanted him to fulfill them for me.

But now, in the darkness, with him lurking at my back like a predator waiting to strike, it's like I'm frozen, unsure if I'm actually going to make this leap of…well, not *faith*.

More like damnation.

"Well?" Kaiju growls into my ear, his voice moving as he prowls around me. "While I do have questions about why and how the fuck you're here, given that *I* don't have *my* location shared, you're obviously not *really* here to try and get a job with the Yakuza." He says it in a mocking tone which grates on me a little.

Why is that "obvious"? I want to ask. *Because I'm a woman?*

Joke's on him if he knew who my father is, who *I* am. But even if I could somehow tell him, I wouldn't. That's not what I'm here for.

So what ARE you here for, if you're not going to run?

The masked monster stops mid-prowl around me. He sighs heavily.

"Now you're just wasting my fucking time," he growls. "So let's do this. You either run—now—or I take you back into that other room and fuck you on stage in front of all of them. I can't promise what might happen to you after I'm done, but who knows, maybe you're into group play."

My spine snaps to attention, my pulse throbbing like liquid fire.

"So for the *very last fucking time*, little prey," Kaiju murmurs darkly. I feel his hot breath against my cheek as he leans in from the side. "*Time. To fucking. RUN.*"

This time, I do.

The first step is instinctive, raw survival taking over as I bolt through the darkness, my feet pounding on the concrete floor. The blackness stretches out in every direction, oppressive, endlessly suffocating. My hood falls back as I sprint, my coppery blonde hair whipping around me.

There's a dark, malevolent laugh somewhere in the emptiness around me. His footsteps follow, deliberate and steady, the sound of them thundering in my ears. He's not rushing; he doesn't have to. Each step feels calculated, predatory, designed to remind me that no matter how fast I run, he *will* catch me.

In the almost pitch-black gloom a door suddenly looms ahead, dimly outlined by the faintest sliver of light. I find the handle, my pulse roaring as I twist it open and slam through.

Outside, the neon glow of the city lights hit me like a slap. The cool night air envelops my lungs as I sprint through the Mori estate.

It's a huge compound with manicured gardens, winding paths, and towering stone walls. Shadows stretch across the grass like dark fingers reaching for

me, and every rustle of a leaf or snap of a twig feels like his presence closing in.

I zigzag through the garden, trying to lose him in the maze of hedges and trees. My body screams for rest, my legs burning, but I can't stop. Not when I hear him growing closer, each footfall reminding me just how small the gap between us is becoming.

I vault over a low stone wall, landing heavily on the other side. The impact jars me, pain shooting up to my knees, but I push forward. My breathing is ragged, my vision tunneling, but I don't look back. Looking back means seeing him. It means seeing how close he is. I can't afford that.

"How about a little faster?" his voice taunts from the shadows to my right, dark amusement lacing every syllable. "You're doing so well, *Snowflake*."

A shudder wracks my body. The idea that he knows exactly who I am—that he's known from the moment I stepped into the place—sends fresh terror pulsing through my veins.

I'm not just being hunted. I'm being *toyed with*.

I dart left, then right, weaving through the labyrinthine garden until I come to a sudden halt.

Dead end.

A towering hedge blocks my path, and the footsteps behind me grow louder, closing in with unnerving, unwavering precision.

I turn slowly, my back pressed against the hedge. He emerges from the shadows, his *oni* mask glinting in the moonlight. Shirtless, his ink-covered body radiates menace, every muscle taut with restrained power. The baseball bat rests casually on his shoulder, the weapon almost making a mockery of the situation. He doesn't need it to subdue me.

He's already won.

"Caught you," he says, his voice a dark purr that sends shivers rippling down my spine.

I’m trembling, my chest heaving as I try to summon a defense, anything to hold him at bay. But he steps closer, the space between us vanishing, his presence swallowing me whole.

Japan isn’t exactly known for its tall population, but Kaiju *towers* over me, easily six-foot-four, maybe even more. His bare, tattooed shoulders are broad and muscular, his arms powerful and sculpted. His abs look to be carved from stone, disappearing in a V-shape into his black jeans.

Suddenly he surges right into me, shoving me back against the hedge-covered wall. My eyes bulge as the smooth wood of the baseball bat presses on my wrists, pinning them high over my head against the rough twigs behind me.

His strength is effortless, the bat held in one hand as if my resistance is laughable, his body caging mine with predatory heat. The coarse leaves of the hedge bite into my back, but the sharp sensation is nothing compared to the searing awareness of the man himself—his bare chest so close I can feel the warmth radiating off his ink-covered skin.

His mask tilts down toward me, the leering grin of the *oni* demon swallowing my vision as his free hand drags slowly along the curve of my jaw. My heart hammers wildly, a rhythm betraying fear and something darker as his voice curls through the night, low, dangerously amused.

“I have to admit, I’m impressed by the fight in you, little prey.”

I shiver as he leans even closer, tilting his head to the side as he crowds into the crook of my neck, near my ear.

“Impressed and *turned the fuck on*.”

Without warning, his free hand suddenly shoots out, pinching the zipper at the front of my hoodie and yanking it down. His eyes drop to the front of my black t-shirt, his mask tipping to the side again. The black emptiness of the mask’s eyes pierces my skin, sending shivers up my spine and tightening my nipples to pebbled points under the cotton.

A dark laugh rumbles from behind his mask.

“Looks like I’m not the only one, either.”

He reaches out suddenly and roughly pinches one of my nipples between his forefinger and thumb. Pain and pleasure zip through me, electrifying me and bringing a choked, gurgling sound to my throat. He twists his fingers, mercilessly pulling and tugging on my nipple as something vicious curls and throbs in my core.

He pinches again, harder this time. I choke on another gasp, my back arching sharply as I strain against the bat pinning my wrists over my head.

But there's no getting away. No dislodging him.

I'm helpless.

"Now…" he muses quietly. "I wonder where I should start with you. I'll admit, the prospect of using your mouth right now is very tempting. But that would involve removing your mask," he murmurs, lifting his black gaze to my hidden face.

I stiffen.

"Kaiju" chuckles darkly.

"And that's a prospect that terrifies you, for some reason. Of course, that only makes me want to remove this mask even *more*. I'm so curious who I'll find," he continues slowly, his voice somehow both mocking and sensual. "Some rich little princess? Daughter of a government official? Perhaps you're *married*, little prey." He grunts one mirthless, dark laugh. "Or maybe it's just that the idea of letting me look such a naughty, eager little fucktoy in the eye terrifies you."

I gurgle again as he roughly pinches my other nipple.

"You obviously like it rough and tinged with pain. So perhaps there's another place I should start with you," he growls, looming closer. "Maybe I'll turn you around and ram my cock up your tight little ass right here against the hedge."

My eyes bulge behind my mask. Sweat slicks the small of my back as his hand slides to my neck. His long, powerful fingers wrap around my throat, squeezing just enough to send a pulse of adrenaline roaring through my system, making my legs shake.

“What the fuck are you doing?”

I jolt at the sound of another voice, behind Kaiju: a voice that also speaks in clear English, with a British accent. The man with his fingers wrapped around my throat tenses up—but not because he’s been caught.

Because he’s been *interrupted*, and he’s annoyed about it.

He exhales roughly. His black-out eyes stay locked on me, as if weighing my fate. Then suddenly he releases my wrists, lowering the bat. His hand drops from my throat. Cool air rushes into my lungs as I inhale sharply, shuddering as he slowly turns away from me.

I catch a brief glimpse of the other man: Caucasian, with tattoos snaking out from under his t-shirt, up his neck and down his arms. But then my masked attacker turns fully toward him, blocking him from my view.

I quickly tuck my hair back into a bun and stuff it back into the hoodie, zipping it up as my pulse skitters and ripples.

“Can I fucking *help you*, Mal?” Kaiju mutters darkly.

Mal…

The gears inside my head turn for a second, then it clicks. Mal as in Mal Ulstäd, cousin to Kenzo Mori, head of the Mori-kai.

“Yeah, you can. It’s your fucking initiation, and you just walked out.”

I can hear him walking closer. Kaiju steps to the side as Mal approaches, his brow furrowed as his gaze lands on me.

“What the fuck is this, man?”

“Part of the initiation,” Kaiju growls darkly. “Part of *my* initiation. I was…” He turns toward me, tilting his head to the side in a way that might be amusement or might equally be menace.

“*Testing* this one.”

“Okay, well, you’re needed back there.”

Kaiju shrugs, holding the baseball bat over his muscled shoulder.

“Fine.”

“What about him?” Mal grunts, nodding at me.

Kaiju turns to leer at me through his blank, emotionless mask. The seconds tick by.

“He’s done,” he finally growls. “I’ll kick his ass out.”

I shudder as his huge hand jerks out and grabs my upper arm. His grip is rough and unmerciful as he turns and starts to drag me after him across the compound. My legs feel like jelly as I stumble after him.

Back inside, he leads me down a few dark hallways until we reach the same side door I entered through before. I’m still shaking everywhere as he hauls me out the door and finally releases me.

He doesn’t move. He just stands there, baseball bat draped across the back of his neck, his arms over it and his head to the side as that blank, black stare stabs into my very soul.

“Playtime is done for now, *prey*,” he growls quietly, a slightly amused tone in his voice.

I inhale sharply as he moves right into me, looming over me.

“But don’t think for a *second* that this is over…”

And deep down, I know he’s right.

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3

KATARINA

"SOMETIMES I WONDER if I've failed you, raising you to be stronger than our world permits."

My father's words settle heavily into the space between us. He's seated across from me in his office, his hands folded neatly on the oak desk as if we were discussing something as inconsequential as a shipping route, instead of my entire future, and our family's.

I hate every second of it.

Kolya Ishida doesn't say things lightly, not to anyone, and certainly not to me. He wields words like weapons, precisely and deliberately. There's something softer in his tone just now, a rare glimpse of the man beneath the steel exterior. Then it's gone as quickly as it came, his storm-gray eyes pinning me in place with cold resolve.

Many people find my father confusing, because they like to put others into boxes that are easy to distinguish or label, and Kolya Ishida defies description.

Part Russian, part Japanese, Papa is a complex man. For one, his reputation is one based on brutality and savagery: that's followed him ever since he returned to Japan to claim what was his.

Papa's mom, my grandmother Kiko, was the daughter of the Ishida-kai *Oyabun.* When she eschewed her arranged marriage because she had fallen in love with a Russian man, my great-grandfather banished her for loving a

man from another world and culture and cut her out of the family. And then Grandpa Leo’s Bratva family did the same to him for the same reason.

So they moved to Vladivostok, in the harshness of Northeastern Russia, where they lived as outcasts as they raised my father and my uncle Jin, straddling a cultural divide between old-school Japan and old-school Russia.

When Papa's parents died when he was just a teenager, Papa took matters into his own hands. He came back to Japan, not as a tourist, nor as a beggar looking for a handout from his estranged family.

As a dark angel of vengeance.

Papa took on the full might of the Ishida-kai, hacking away at them little by little until he finally went head-to-head with his own grandfather and killed him for throwing my grandmother out into to the cold.

Papa seized both his grandfather’s sword and his empire and honed them to a deadly force, turning the Ishida-kai into the most powerful Yakuza family in Tokyo.

Until the fucking Mori-kai decided to branch out from Kyoto.

“Papa, you haven’t *failed* me—”

“You know what I mean, *Koshka*. Women do not lead alone in the Yakuza world,” he continues, leaning back slightly, the subtle wince and tightening of his jaw betraying the pain in his back.

He never speaks of it beyond the clinical updates I force him to give me. But three months ago, doctors found the source of the pain he kept having in his back and neck: a tumor growing on his spine.

A tumor that’s threatening to kill, or at least cripple, the father I love.

A tumor trying to take down a man that no assassin or war ever has.

A tumor which is directly responsible for this whole goddamn conversation.

“You need a husband, *Koshka*.”

The “kitty-cat” nickname is less cute when it comes after those first four words this time. They sting, not because they’re unexpected, but because they’re inevitable. I’ve heard this argument before, but that doesn’t make it any easier to swallow.

“I don’t need a husband to lead,” I sign quickly, my hands calm despite the fire simmering in my chest.

“No, you don’t,” he says simply. “But the men who will answer to you need to *believe* that you do. The interconnected alliances that I’ve built across this city in the last twenty-five years do as well. This isn’t about your ability, Katarina. It’s about perception. If you want to lead effectively, you need to silence any doubts before they take root.”

“Right, because a woman can’t lead, obviously,” I sign. “Who knows what chaos I’d sew as a puppet to the whims of my weak, inferior hormones and emotions. I mean, God forbid I should get my period during a negotiation—”

“Katarina.”

I trail off, dropping my hands and glaring at the desk between us. My anger isn’t directed at Papa. I know he’s on my side and dislikes the idea of me marrying for this reason as much as I do. But reality *is* reality.

“Do you have someone in mind?” I continue, raising my eyes to his, the walls of his office closing in with every word.

His expression remains unreadable. “Rodion Vorobev.”

I feel my stomach twist. “You can’t be serious.”

“He’s the heir to the Vorobev Bratva, Kat. Their operations in the Port of Tokyo are expanding rapidly. An alliance with them would fortify us against anything that might develop later with the Mori-kai.”

“Rodion is a notorious drunk,” I gesture quickly, my eyes desperate. “He’s been kicked out of virtually every bar and club in Tokyo, even with the power his family wields.”

My father sighs. “Yes, and that can be to your advantage.”

“Excuse me?”

“You’re correct. He’s a drunk buffoon. That means he’s controllable—easily so, at that.”

“That doesn't change the fact that pretending a sloppy, vodka-swilling piece of shit like Rodion Vorobev is leading our organization is a better look that me, simply because I menstruate.”

Papa’s brow furrows. He was a rock, raising me on his own after my mother died when I was barely a baby. But still. I know there are aspects of our gender differences that throw him off at times.

…Which, obviously, I use when I have to.

“This isn’t about what you or I *want*, Katarina. It’s about what the Ishida-kai *needs*.”

I stand abruptly, my chair scraping against the floor as I push it back. “Then find someone else to sacrifice on the altar of the Yakuza,” I sign coldly. “It won’t be me.”

He doesn’t stop me as I leave the office and storm to my bedroom before slamming the door shut behind me. For a moment I just stand there breathing heavily, my heart pounding in my chest, the weight of the conversation pressing down on me like a stone, heavy and suffocating as the walls of the estate.

I need an outlet. Something to distract me from the cage my life has become.

Before I know it, my phone is in my hand, and I’m opening the Venom app for the first time in a week, since I fled the Mori-kai initiation.

I should note that my father doesn’t know anything about the initiation and never will. Not just because I snuck into the Mori-kai’s base of operations in Tokyo, which I'll grant was beyond reckless.

But because I *left this house at all*.

I’ve heard every version of every rumor concerning the fact that I barely leave home and hardly ever make public appearances. Some assume it’s

because Papa is controlling and overly protective of me, especially after that week of darkness and fear when I was nine when he almost lost me.

Others assume I’m agoraphobic and can’t bring myself to leave. There was once some truth to that particular rumor, but I’ve gotten over that now.

No, the reason I’m scarcely seen out and about is mostly strategic, a decision made by both Papa and me: if I’m hidden away, and if enemies and allies alike don’t know what to make of it, human nature will lead them to think the weakest of me.

That I’m scared of the world. That I’m a freak. That I’m "touched", or something.

It means *they’ll underestimate me*.

I do go out—infrequently—but when I do, I’m usually in disguise. Up until a couple of months ago, I even had my own secret elevator at my apartment that went down to a sub-garage, where Okita would be waiting to drive me wherever.

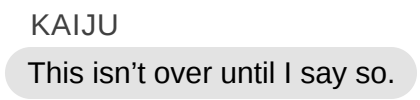
Except that all changed when Kenzo Mori’s beyond-psychotic younger brother, Takeshi, *set it on fucking fire* a few months ago as some sort of insane provocation before our almost-war with his family devolved into a Cold War.

Crazy fucking asshole.

I do love Papa, but there was a *reason* I’d been living on my own for the last year…

Back in my room, staring at the Venom app on my screen, my pulse quickens as I navigate to my messages. Kaiju’s name is there, glaring at me like a taunt.

I hesitate for a moment before clicking on his profile. The last message he sent still lingers on the screen:



As if summoned by my thoughts, a new message suddenly appears, making my pulse spike so hard I almost drop the phone.

KAIJU

Meet me.

KAIJU

Showa Kinen Park, in Tachikawa. Midnight tonight.

My fingers tremble as I type.

SNOWFLAKE

Why would I meet you?

His response sends a bolt of something dark and forbidden through me.

KAIJU

Because my dick is still hungry for your pussy and your futile cries for mercy.

My eyes bulge. Jesus *fuck*.

KAIJU

Because you sought me out for a reason, little prey. And I very much doubt that reason has vanished in a week.

KAIJU

But mostly, because what I told you before still holds true, even if you tell yourself otherwise.

My throat bobs heavily.

SNOWFLAKE

What holds true?

KAIJU

This isn’t over until I fucking say so. So meet me, or I WILL come find you.

My mind spins, a hundred scenarios flashing through my head—some pulse-poundingly arousing, others terrifying. My fingers hover over the keyboard. Before I can reply, another message appears.

KAIJU

Don’t make me wait, Snowflake.

A shiver runs through me. My thumb hovers over the screen, the temptation to say yes almost overwhelming. But then I remember the chase, the way he toyed with me like a predator savoring his prey.

Meet me, or I WILL come find you.

I quickly navigate to my profile, my eyes scanning the settings until I exhale with a rush. The location sharing is still off, like I toggled it right after I fled the Mori compound the other night.

He can’t “come find me”.

He doesn’t even know who I am.

If he knew that, he’d have never in a million years have let me go the other night. Whoever he is, he’s clearly someone high up in the Mori-kai. And I’m, well, Kolya Ishida’s daughter and only heir.

All the more reason to walk the hell away.

I don’t bother responding. I just slam the phone down on the side table next to my bed, my heart pounding.

But as I sit there, staring at the phone, his words from the other night echo in my mind, a dark promise I can’t shake.

“But don’t think for a second *that this is over…”*

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4

KATARINA

THE SHADOWS in my room stretch long and deep, swallowing the faint neon from the city outside peeking in around the edges of the blinds.

Space is a luxury in Tokyo, given the price of land in the city, and my father’s house sits on an astounding amount of it. The Ishida mansion sits on a full *acre* of land, surrounded by high walls, hedges, security cameras, and heavily armed guards.

Even though the biggest city on the planet sprawls all around this house, it's quiet inside, thanks to soundproofed walls and windows.

But I’m not thinking about the expensive house, or the even more expensive land it sits on, or the sound-blocking windows.

I’m only thinking about how fucking good my fingers feels as they roll over my swollen clit.

The silence is broken only by the soft rustle of fabric as I shift on the bed. Face down, my legs spread and my hand beneath me, my heart pounds, blood thrumming through my veins with an intensity that feels extra foreign and raw.

I shouldn’t be thinking about him. But I am.

The memory of his touch and his words haunts me like a demon I can’t exorcise. I press my cheek into the pillow, my mind replaying the way he looked at me through our masks, as if he already owned me. The way he

spoke, his voice dark and edged with amusement, as if my resistance was a game he'd already won.

My breath quickens. I try to tell myself it's anger—the audaciously dominant way he'd turned me into prey with nothing more than his presence. But it's not anger that heats my skin or sets my nerves alight. It's something darker that I've spent years trying to suppress.

But here in the darkness, in the locked sanctuary of my room in my private wing of the house, I can allow those demons inside of me to roam free. I feel them slithering over my skin, teasing across my body as my toes curl against the sheets and my back arches.

My hand works inside my panties, my fingers alternately stroking my lips and sinking between them, rubbing my clit as my breath catches.

I picture what might have happened if I'd actually gone through with his request to meet him in Showa Kinen Park tonight. The fantasy runs rampant through my mind: images of the masked, shirtless giant with the muscles carved from marble, painted in tattoos. The man throbbing with savagery and malice, baseball bat casually slung over his shoulder, his demonic *oni* mask leering, stalking after me through the woods of the park.

Emerging from behind every tree. Trailing my every step.

I gasp, running and twisting away from him. He only gets closer and closer, until suddenly those long, powerful fingers wrap around my throat from behind. He yanks me to the ground, ripping and cutting at my clothes. I tell him to stop, but he doesn't.

He only touches me harder, more roughly.

My fingers plunge inside me, a choked whimper catching low in my throat as I pretend it's him. My other hands slips up my neck to squeeze it, though it's not nearly as satisfying. So I bring my hand to my mouth, sucking two fingers inside while pushing back against my other hand.

Wanting him. The darkness he promises. Fear and aching need blurring together.

A creak cuts through the silence, slicing into my thoughts like a blade. I freeze, my body stilling as the faintest shift of movement reaches my ears. It's subtle, almost imperceptible: a shadow sliding against the others, a whisper of air displaced by motion.

For half a second, I'm sure I've imagined it. Then I feel it.

Darkness, sliding over me. A presence, lurking.

Eyes, raking over my skin.

I'm not alone.

Cold, sharp panic floods my veins as I start to twist onto my back. Before I can turn fully, a shadow lurches across the room.

A shadow with the leering, blank, black face of an *oni* mask.

A hand presses me down, strong and unyielding, wrapping around the back of my neck and pinning me to the mattress.

I choke out the remains of a withered, silent scream as I flail and thrash. The hand only tightens, pushing me harder against the bed beneath me. My hips twist, my legs squirming and kicking. But it's like fighting gravity or stopping time.

"Don't move," he murmurs, his voice low and laced with dark amusement.

My whole world goes still.

It's him.

Kaiju.

I don't know how, seeing as my location setting was off. But I don't have the bandwidth to consider that right now. All I can process is the swirling, throbbing, explosive mix of pure panic and jolting excitement.

Every instinct screams at me to fight, to run. But his grip tightens just enough to make my breath hitch: his dominance as electrifying as it is suffocating.

“You should be more careful, Snowflake,” he says, his lips so close to my ear that his breath ghosts across my skin. “A little princess like you, unmasked and all alone in her father’s house… What would Daddy think if he saw you like this?”

The words hit me like a slap.

He called me princess.

He knows it’s Papa’s house.

He knows who I am.

For some reason, that’s even scarier than him being here, or trying to figure out how the fuck he got past all our security to break into my room undetected. Or even *how* he knows who I am.

No, the most terrifying part, occupying my entire thought process, is that he knows who I am *at all*.

I’m utterly exposed in every conceivable way.

I jerk my arms out from under my chest to sign to him to get the fuck off me—as if he’d even know what I was saying. But he’s got me pinned so hard I can’t move my hands at all—neither the one trapped under my torso, nor—mortifyingly—the one still wedged between my legs, inside my panties.

He chuckles, the sound dark and predatory. “Oh, princess,” he murmurs, a throaty chuckle rumbling in his chest. I squirm and fight against him again, this time managing to twist my face to the side.

Instantly my pulse chills as my eyes take him in.

He’s all in black, the same *oni* mask obscuring his face and covering his eyes. His free hand brushes down my arm, light and deliberate, savoring the tension coiled in my body.

“Tell me to stop and I will. Say the word and I’ll vanish back into the shadows.”

The challenge in his voice burns through me. He's daring me to reclaim the control he's stolen with his presence. But my lips won't form the words.

They fucking can't.

And now, he's going to take my silence as acquiescence.

"Mmm, that's what I thought," he whispers, his grip on my neck easing slightly but still firm enough to keep me in place. "Just like last time, it appears. Outwardly trying to show how incensed you are, how much you want to get away. But you don't, not really. And your little games do nothing to prevent me from seeing what a horny, wet, greedy little toy you are."

His hand skims lower, his touch igniting my skin even through my t-shirt.

"Do you want to know why I'm here?" he asks, his voice softening but losing none of its menace. His hand brushes a strand of hair from my face gently, so at odds with the malice that radiates from him. "Well?"

All I can do is shake my head—or at least try, seeing as he's still gripping the back of my neck.

"Allow me to explain," he murmurs. "I couldn't stop thinking about you. The way you ran, the way you fought… the way you looked at me when I told you to run."

My stomach twists, my body betraying me as heat coils low and deep.

"*You liked it*," he continues, his words a knife sliding between my ribs. "Being chased. Being caught. Don't bother lying to me, Snowflake. *I know*."

Tears sting my eyes, hot and unbidden. Shame courses through me, but it's tangled up with a dark, forbidden thrill that I can't suppress no matter how hard I try.

"Do you know what I want from you?" he growls quietly.

Before I can even attempt to shake my head again, his hand returns to my back. His fingers trail down my spine, bumping over each little vertebra through my thin shirt. His hand skims lower and lower, until his fingers slip

over the bottom hem, tracing over the bare skin at the small of my back. A shudder jerks through me, my body spasming slightly. It brings a low, dark chuckle to his throat.

"*Everything*," he murmurs. "I want *everything*. But we'll start with this."

Without warning, his hand slips between my legs. My eyes bulge, a wordless cry rising to my silenced throat as his hand cups mine through my panties.

"My *my*," he muses, a touch of cruelty in his tone. "Playing with yourself like a horny little slut. I hope it was me you were thinking about."

His fingers hook under the gusset of my panties, boldly pulling them aside as my face explodes with heat, shame, and something I don't want to admit even to myself.

"Let's continue where you left off."

He grabs my hand, lacing his fingers with mine. And then, before I can register it, he's suddenly pushing my fingers *and his* against my slick opening.

My eyes widen. My mouth falls open as thunder explodes in my core.

"Mmm," he groans, easing one of his fingers and one of mine inside. My body coils and quivers, toes curling against the sheets as my back arches. "*So* fucking tight, princess," he murmurs. "We're going to have to stretch this tight little pussy out if my cock is ever going to fit in there."

I shudder, biting down on my lip and squirming as his words coil around me.

If my cock is ever going to fit in there.

Because no cock ever *has*—fit in there, that is.

If I'm being honest, nobody's ever touched me the way he is right now.

I grunt low in my throat as his one hand tightens around my neck while the other begins to stroke his finger and mine in and out of my pussy.

…My shamefully *wet*, eager, quivering pussy.

My face flushes with heat as the embarrassing, wet sounds of my own arousal fill the room. Kaiju growls, pinning me to the bed with one hand on my neck, the other ramming both of our fingers in and out of me.

Then I feel him add another of his fingers.

Fuck. It’s so fucking tight, but *so* good as he stretches me open even more, thrusting into me with hard, deep motions that have my legs trembling as I bite down on my pillow.

Suddenly, there’s even more. I shudder violently, my toes kicking at the sheets, my nipples tight and electric against my t-shirt as he adds a third finger.

Sweet fucking hell.

He’s stretching me to the limit, filling me more than I’ve ever dreamed I would be. My eyes roll back, a silent scream of pleasure bubbling just behind my lips. I’m vaguely aware of his hand slipping from my neck, but I don’t make any attempt to fight him off again, or even to move.

All I can do is lie there, squirming, writhing, shamefully pushing back, wanting more. Needing more.

Aching for him to bring me to the edge and push me over into oblivion.

“Mmm, princess,” he groans. “I told myself I was coming here to fuck you in every hole you have. But this desperate, *tight* little pussy needs stretching and opening first. You'll need to get used to my fingers before I’ll ever cram my cock into this pretty little hole.”

Over and over, his fingers ram into me, curling deep against a place inside that turns my body to jelly and sends my thoughts and reality shattering into a billion pieces. He starts fingering me even harder and faster, the wet sounds filling my ears as my thighs begin to shake.

Then my legs. Then the rest of me.

And suddenly, without warning, it slams into me like a truck.

I scream a noiseless cry into the pillow, my entire body wrenching and twisting as the single biggest orgasm of my life explodes through me. Kaiju

groans, feeling my pussy tighten and gush around him.

"*There's a* good girl," he murmurs darkly. "Let me feel how fucking messy this little cunt can get for me."

His fingers keep ramming into me. Suddenly, I'm coming all over again. This time, I hear him grunt behind me as I do so, his body tight against the edge of the bed. I turn my face, and when I see it, illuminated faintly by the neon glow from outside, my body convulses yet again.

He's got his other hand wrapped around his very hard, *enormous* cock, stroking it up and down as he fingers me to orgasm. I watch as he groans, the head of his dick swelling huge before suddenly the fat length in his hand begins to twitch and pulse violently.

Holy fuck.

Thick white ropes of cum erupt from the head, splattering wet, heavy, and hot across my ass cheeks and the backs of my thighs. Kaiju grunts, his jaw clenched as he fists his cock, pumping another rope of sticky cum across my butt, letting it dribble down to where his fingers are scissoring inside of me.

I watch, utterly spellbound as he uses his thumb to push the cum from my ass and thighs between my legs, rubbing it against my pussy, scooping up more and more of it, even pushing it inside my pussy lips.

"I told you this wasn't over yet, princess."

My face is numb with heat, my mouth hanging open as I force myself to twist my head, my wide eyes wordlessly finding his as if to ask "Is it over *now*?"

"Not yet, princess," he murmurs, making me think for a terrifying second that he's a literal mind reader. "It's still not over."

I whimper as he pushes two fingers into me, stroking them in and out before pulling them free. Then he brings the two glistening, sticky digits up to my mouth.

"Open," he growls with a commanding tone.

And I do.

I shiver as he slips his wet fingers between my lips, letting me…maybe *forcing me*…to taste myself.

Myself and him, together.

My lips close around his fingertips, and my tongue tentatively swirls around them.

"*Good girl*."

He leans down. Before I can register it, he's pushed his mask up slightly and kissing me, pulling his fingers from my mouth and *licking them himself*.

Then he stands up, rolling his shoulders and pulling the mask down again. Not once have I seen his eyes.

"This still isn't over, princess. I'd respond to my messages from now on. Or the next time, when I find you and fuck you, it'll be wherever the hell you currently are, even if that's right in front of your family at the dinner table. Are we clear?"

All I can do is nod, my entire body limp and shaking.

"Good girl."

He steps out of sight behind me. Part of me wants to turn and look at him, to drink in his presence. But the other part of me can't even move. So I just lie there, sprawled out and shaking, trying to force my pulse back to some semblance of normalcy, until I suddenly realize I can't hear or feel him.

I whip my head around, and my body stiffens.

He's vanished, as suddenly as he appeared.

The weight of his hand, the heat of his presence—all of it has melted away into the shadows, leaving me lying there, trembling and breathless, the memory of it all still burning in my mind.

Shaken. Angry. *Aroused*.

I press a hand to my chest, feeling the rapid beat of my heart beneath my palm. The room is silent again, but the chaos he's left behind rages on within me.

Something tells me he's righter than I am willing to admit.

This isn't over at all.

It's barely begun.

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5

KATARINA

"DOES IT OWE YOU MONEY?"

I'm startled out of my thoughts by Nina's hands signing in front of my face, and my gaze lifts from the piece of *Hamachi* sashimi I've been stabbing repeatedly with my chopstick without even realizing it.

I glance at her somewhat sheepishly. She grins at me.

"Like, maybe give it a chance to pay you before you murder it?"

I roll my eyes, managing a faint smile as I glance at her. "Just practicing for the wedding night," I sign, dropping my eyes to the small, pale piece of raw fish on my plate. "I'm guessing this is about as much as I can expect from him."

Nina bites back a snort. Her sharp blue eyes glint with amusement, though she keeps her expression neutral.

"Everything okay, *Nina*?" Papa mutters quietly, yanking both our gazes across the table. He eyes us coldly, his expression tolerating zero bullshit.

Obviously, Papa knows what we're signing. I could switch from the American Sign Language that Nina and I usually use to the Japanese version, and he'd *still* know. He's good with languages, something I've inherited from him. I may not *speak* anything these days. But I can fluently understand Japanese, English, Russian, and Italian, as can Nina.

Next to me, she blushes, clearing her throat. “Everything is fine, Kolya-san,” she says with a quiet smile. “I merely had something in my throat.”

“Well, I’m glad it’s no longer there,” Papa answers dryly. “Still, why don’t we keep the conversation in a language the whole table understands,” he murmurs, turning to smile benignly at our guests.

Sergey Vorobev clears his throat. “Is no problem, Kolya,” he grunts in his thick Russian accent. “My son will be doubling up on his signing lessons as we proceed with this…” He glances at his idiot offspring, who’s halfway through chugging his god-only-knows what number glass of wine for the evening. “*Arrangement,*” Sergey finishes, squinting meaningfully at his son.

I pick at the delicate slices of sashimi on my plate, zoning out and letting it all fade to white noise. Everything about tonight feels distant, unimportant. My mind drifts back to that evening, four nights ago.

Four endless, sleepless nights.

I still don’t know how he got in, or left without a trace. I’ve gone over the security footage from all over the house myself, frame by frame, looking for a flicker of movement, a single shadow out of place. There was *nothing*. It’s like he materialized out of the darkness itself, grabbed me, put his hands on me, *made me come*, and then vanished again like smoke.

My chest tightens as I remember his hand—strong, unrelenting—pressing the back of my neck. *Three* of his thick fingers driving in and out of me. His voice, deep and dangerous, sending a shiver skittering down my spine as he whispered things I can’t let myself even think about now in the cold light of day.

I remember my heart racing, torn between terror and the thrill of surrender, and the heat of him, far too close and yet not close enough.

A lump catches in my throat, shame mixing with the lingering fire of my own betrayal. Part of me has been waiting for him to come back again. Another part of me has been dreading it, to the point that I’ve moved Furrcules’ cat bed to the foot of my own.

Rodion belches loudly, grinning from ear to ear as he lifts his empty glass.

“To Katarina,” he announces loudly, his glass raised high, swaying in his unsteady hand. “The hottest woman in Tokyo, and my future wife.”

My stomach tightens and his father Sergey shifts awkwardly beside him, offering a strained chuckle that does little to mask his discomfort. Nina’s gaze flicks to me again, her expression unreadable, though the look in her eyes speaks volumes.

“How very flattering,” I sign, my face neutral. “I can’t wait to shove you over the first balcony we walk past, you disgusting troll.”

My father shoots me a look, even though neither Rodion nor his father understands a single word of sign language.

“Ms. Osipova,” Sergey says with a slight chuckle, turning to Nina. “Would you mind translating for us?”

“Yes, please do, Nina,” I sign, a large smile on my face. “Don’t leave out a single thing—”

“*Katarina*,” Papa growls quietly, another warning look on his face before he turns to Sergey. “My daughter was just saying she looks forward to bridging the gap between our two families and seeing how far we can take this partnership.”

“Very well…ahh…*said*,” Sergey smiles. “Very well indeed, Ms. Ishida.”

I take a large gulp of wine. Nina taps my thigh. I glance over to see her signing “I’ll be on the lookout for balconies” under the table.

This is why we’re best friends.

Technically speaking, Nina is a hostage of my father’s. The Bratva—and the Yakuza too—both tend to draw inspiration from both medieval times and *Game of Thrones*. And one of their customs is the idea of taking a “ward”, AKA, a hostage.

Nina’s father, Mitya Osopov, was once an ally of my father's…until Mitya double-crossed him, trying both to steal his distribution network and put a bullet in Kolya's head on a trip back to Russia.

Obviously, he failed to do either.

Mitya then immediately bent the knee, groveling and begging for forgiveness. Now, normally, given my father's bloody and brutal history, neither of those things would have done a damn thing to move the imaginary needle to save the fucker. But in this rare case, for some reason, Papa found a shred of forgiveness inside him and *did* spare Mitya.

Spared his life, at least. He *did* take the majority of his empire, his standing within any Bratva circle on Earth, and his daughter, Nina.

This was about eleven years ago, and Nina's been with us ever since. I say "hostage" mostly as a joke: at this point, she's basically an Ishida. And in any case, even if she doesn't really talk about her time "before", I know she has nothing nice to say about her family back in Russia.

We're best friends, practically sisters, and joined at the hip most of the time. Which is good, because she's also my translator when we're around people who don't sign.

"Will she ever talk?"

My eyes snap to Rodion as he dumps the rest of the wine from the bottle into his glass.

Papa clears his throat. Sergey winces.

In a way, I almost feel bad for the guy. Yes, by all accounts, he's kind of a prick himself. But then I try to imagine having a walking, talking turd like *Rodion* as a son, and it's impossible not to feel some sympathy for him.

Still…

"My apologies," Sergey growls. "My son has had a *bit too much*," he hisses sharply, yanking the glass away from Rodion's mouth and setting it sharply down on the table.

"It's an honest question," Rodion slurs. "I mean, Father," he sighs, changing to Russian as he glances at Sergey, "what am I supposed to do? Fuck a mute who can't even moan for my—"

"Despite her condition," my father says coldly, his voice sharp as his eyes stab into Rodion. "My daughter is fluent in Russian." His eyes narrow. "*As.*

Am. I.”

“Sincere apologies again, Kolya-san,” Sergey says tightly, bowing his head. “He’s…not usually like this.”

I purse my lips as I turn toward Nina. “Maybe I’ll feed him to Furrcules,” I sign.

Furrcules would be my baby. Okay, not a human baby. Furrcules is a one-hundred-pound, adorable, death machine…AKA, a six-month-old tiger cub that I took in five months ago.

Ryu, Papa’s top advisor and one of his best *waka gashira*, found him when he was raiding a Triad-owned warehouse. Furrcules’ mother was being used to guard drugs and, unfortunately, was killed in the ensuing gun battle. But Ryu found the barely weaned little cub and, knowing how much I’ve always loved tigers, brought it home for me.

Is gifting someone a tiger cub a good idea? No. And at some point, there’s going to be no way I can keep my little fuzzball and expect to survive. But until that day comes he’s my little prince and my baby, and I will feed the *shit* out of Rodion fucking Vorobev to him if the asshole keeps running his mouth like this.

“Katarina,” Rodion blurts, leaning lopsidedly across the table on one elbow. “You and I… We will make a hell of a match. Think of the power our families will have together.”

“I’m thinking more about what an utter disgrace it would be to be seen with you, let alone be married to you,” I sign.

Sergey smiles, turning to Nina. “Ms. Osipova?”

Nina clears her throat. “She says she’s looking forward to getting to know your son—”

“Please, Kolya,” Sergey says, turning to Papa. “What she truly said. My skin is thick. I will not get offended.”

Papa sighs, arching a brow. “Very well. My daughter said your son is a drunk bastard, and she’d be embarrassed to be seen with him.”

I grin as a silence descends over the table, turning to dip my chin at Papa. He shoots me a look back, but I can see the slight curl of his lips.

“My son does not speak Japanese,” Sergey suddenly says in slow, halting, but mostly understandable Japanese. “So let us switch to that while he sits there like an idiot.” He glances at the rest of us. “I know what my son is, Kolya. I know he’s beneath you and your daughter. *However*…” A dark smile plays across his mouth as he spreads his arms. “I also know that you *need* a man like my son. I know Katarina is perfectly capable of leading but the Yakuza world won’t allow it. I know you need someone to play her husband. So why don’t we stop playing games and tiptoeing around the subject.”

Fuck.

The dining room goes silent again, except for the sound of Rodion's sashimi hitting the plate as it falls from his chopsticks.

But then there's a sharp knock at the door, and I smile when Ryu steps in, his usual gruff expression on his face.

Most people don’t like Ryu. He’s a cold-hearted asshole most of the time, hardly ever smiles, and I’m not sure I’ve ever heard him say anything nice about anyone.

But he and I get along *swimmingly*.

He nods stiffly at me as he crosses the room to my father, bowing low.

“Kolya-sama,” he murmurs. “An unexpected visitor requests an audience with you.”

Papa’s brow furrows. “Who?”

Ryu clears his throat. “Takeshi Mori.”

The air in the room instantly changes, tension rippling around the table. Papa sits straighter, his jaw tightening, while Sergey’s face pales visibly. Even Rodion sobers up slightly, lowering his glass and frowning in confusion.

Me? I see *red*.

Takeshi fucking Mori, the lunatic psycho younger brother of Kenzo Mori, *Oyabun* of the Mori-kai. Three months ago, the sociopath lit my fucking apartment on fire *while I was in it*. I got out, but Furrcules singed his little whiskers, and even hearing Takeshi's name these days makes me want to stick *his* face in a high-rise fire.

What the *fuck* is he doing here?

"*Really,*" Papa growls quietly.

"He's alone, and unarmed," Ryu murmurs. "But I'll happily…*dispose of him,*" he adds, a low, ominous tone to his voice.

My father's fingers tap the table. "That won't be necessary. Show him in, Ryu."

I gape at him. "Seriously?!" I sign.

He lifts a shoulder. "I could certainly use a change in conversation," he signs back to me. "And I'm curious."

Nina's hand brushes mine under the table in a small gesture of solidarity. A minute later, the door opens again. Ryu steps through, a black look on his face as he moves aside.

And then, Takeshi Mori enters the room.

It's like spilled ink staining a pristine page. He's dressed simply in a black button-up shirt and slacks, his presence a bottomless pit that pulls every gaze to him.

I swallow as I take in his height, his broad shoulders, and his ridiculously chiseled jawline.

Takeshi, like his twin sister Hana and their older brother Kenzo, is half-Japanese, half-Norwegian. On Takeshi, the mix gives him the appearance of a sinfully good-looking but dangerous samurai, with the hulking size of a savage Viking warrior. His mid-length black hair is slicked back, his dark eyes piercing as he approaches the table.

Without any preamble, he hefts the white beverage cooler in his hand, setting it on the table with a heavy thud.

A faint trail of red drips from one corner.

“Kolya-san,” he says, an almost sarcastic smile on his face, his voice smooth and unhurried. “My invitation to dinner must have been lost in the mail.”

Papa eyes him, unfazed, ready for anything.

“I’m quite positive you were sent no invitation.”

Takeshi grins. His eyes sweep over the table, and when they hit me, I feel an electric zap sizzle through me as his piercing eyes cut into me before moving away.

“I forget that you Russians are much more versed in the unspoken manners involved in a Cold War. I should have—”

“What do you *want*, Mr. Mori,” Papa growls quietly. “And what…” My father’s gaze drops to the cooler, then slowly lifts back to Takeshi’s. “Is *that*.”

Takeshi clears his throat, glancing at Sergey and Rodion.

“It would be best if we spoke alone, Kolya-san.”

“And I’m of the opinion that *it would be best* if you didn’t interrupt my dinner parties uninvited, Mr. Mori,” Papa says coldly.

“Hey, buddy,” Rodion slurs, dragging his gaze up to Takeshi. “If you’re taking orders, can you get rid of this shit and bring me some real food?” He shoves his plate of sashimi and sighs heavily. “I don’t know why we’re eating raw fish anyway.”

Dark amusement flashes across Takeshi’s face.

“You’re eating raw fish,” he growls quietly, “because your host is trying to throw you off just enough to put you on his terms. It’s a power move. Him being both Japanese *and* Russian allows him to dip into both cultures, thus either allying or distancing himself as necessary. He could easily be serving you borscht or potatoes or whatever passes for food in Russia to make you both happy. But by serving you sashimi, he makes *you* the outsider, and

since his roots are in this culture, he does so without looking like a poser or an outsider himself."

I blink, stunned, as Takeshi calmly reaches out, deftly plucks an untouched piece of *Hamachi* from Rodion's plate with a fresh set of chopsticks, and pops it into his mouth.

"Mmm. Delicious. On a related note, *learn some fucking manners*, and try to cultivate a better palate, you dumb Russian fuck."

Sergey lurches to his feet, a vicious scowl on his face.

"How *dare you*—"

"Provoke you into fighting your adult son's battles for him?" Takeshi smiles sadly. "Pathetic, I agree. And yet, here we are."

Sergey whirls to Papa. "Kolya-san," he growls. "I ask your permission to beat this Mori-kai piece of shit myself. I won't have a known psychopath waltzing in here and insulting me or my son!"

My father is silent for a moment.

"Kolya!" Sergey snarls. "I said—"

"I heard you," Papa murmurs quietly. "And no—you may not."

"This fucking guy bothering you, Dad?" Rodion lurches unsteadily to his feet and whirls as if to throw a wild punch at Takeshi. But the huge Samurai-Viking of a man quickly grabs Rodion's fist and twists his arm violently. Rodion screams, his face wrenching in pain as Takeshi calmly spins him around, grabs the scruff of his neck, and slams him face-down into his *Hamachi*.

Where the *hell* is my popcorn.

Predictably, chaos erupts. Sergey roars, reaching into his waistband and yanking out a concealed snub-nosed pistol. But instantly, Ryu is on him, ripping the gun from his fingers, kicking his legs out, and bringing the Russian to his knees, a blade to his jugular.

"That's enough."

My father’s voice is neither loud nor angry. Even so, there’s a subtle power to it that silences the whole room. He stands, buttoning his jacket and shooting Sergey a cold look.

“My rules on weapons in my home, at my *dinner table*,” he growls darkly, “were abundantly clear, Sergey.”

“*Da,* but Kolya—”

“Dinner is over.” Papa turns to Ryu. “Please escort our guest and his son out.”

Sergey shoots Papa a cold look. “Don’t be idiotic, Kolya. You need this as much as I—”

“You have twenty seconds to get the fuck out of my house before we see exactly how *little* I need you, Sergey.”

The Russian’s nostrils flare and his face turns beet red as he swallows, nodding stiffly. “We will speak another time, then.”

“Perhaps.”

Papa nods at Ryu and three additional guards who’ve now entered the room. The four of them grab Sergey and haul a groaning Rodion off the table, escorting them both from the room.

Takeshi seems to have observed this entire thing with amusement. He arches a brow, turning to watch Papa’s men leave with Sergey and Rodion.

“Are all of your dinner parties as eventful as this, Kolya?” he asks dryly. “I feel that I’ve been missing out—”

“I’m in no mood for any more bullshit this evening, Mr. Mori,” Papa growls quietly. “So, please, in as few words as possible, what the fuck do you want, and what the *fuck* is that,” he grunts, nodding at the cooler which I've realized is definitely leaking *blood*.

“This,” Takeshi says, his smile cold as he pats the top of the cooler, “is Avgustin Vlasov.”

Oh, shit.

Two months ago, another Yakuza *Oyabun* loyal to the Mori-kai tried to start a war pitting the Ishida and Mori families against each other. He also bribed an ally of my father's, Avgustin Vlasov, into assisting with *kidnapping me*. The scheming *Oyabun's* idea was that *he'd* pick up the pieces after said war, and rule Tokyo himself.

When this *Oyabun's* plan failed and he was killed, Avgustin went into hiding. Papa's had a price on his head ever since.

My father's expression is unreadable as he rises from his seat and approaches the cooler. He opens the lid, peers inside for a long moment, and then lets it fall shut again.

"Well, Mr. Mori," Papa growls. "It would seem you delivered. Although I did say I preferred him *alive*."

Takeshi shrugs, unbothered. "If you don't mind getting a bit *gooey*, find some glue and some stiff boards, and you can probably pretend."

The air is thick with silence, the weight of Takeshi's audacity pressing down on us. Papa's gaze is steady as he eyes our new guest.

"You're waiting for my ask," Takeshi murmurs, his smile widening. A flicker of darkness twinkles in his eyes.

My father's jaw tightens. "Yes, there *was* mention of a favor for whomever found this piece of shit." He levels his gaze at Takeshi. "Fine. Speak."

Slowly, drawing it out, Takeshi swivels his malevolent, unhinged gaze…

…Until it lands on *me*.

Something cold and sharp drags slowly up my spine. An uneasy familiarity sweeps over me, my stomach clenching as his gaze locks with mine. And for a moment, the room fades away. His smile sharpens, turning predatory, as he lifts a single finger to point at me.

"Her," he growls.

My brain short-circuits.

What?

“I want *her*,” Takeshi murmurs quietly. “As my *wife*.”

And just as the roaring in my head begins to turn into a scream—just as I think the bomb has already been dropped—the man with the coal-black eyes, lethal jaw, and yakuza tattoos snaking out from under his shirt turns to level a cold, ruthless look straight at me.

“Doesn’t that sound nice…*Snowflake*?”

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6

KATARINA

THE WALLS of my father’s office feel like they’re closing in as the door shuts behind me. Nina is back in her room—or more likely cuddling Furrcules, because he’s a snuggle-slut like that.

Ryu and his men have taken Avgustin's remains and the gruesome cooler away and are probably doubling up security around the perimeter in the wake of Takeshi’s visit.

He’s gone, too, of course. But the darkness he’s left behind is still clinging to everything like a cloying black mist. Despite telling me he could when I was a kid, Ryu *can’t* actually read minds. But he could still tell that something had massively thrown me off before he left, and it wasn’t just Takeshi’s insane demand, or the cooler full of Avgustin.

Papa walks over to the bar cart, splashing vodka over ice into two glasses. He hands one to me before he sinks into the couch across from the leather chair I’ve thrown myself into. He’s calm, of course. Always is, even when I’m unraveling.

“There’s no way in hell you’re actually entertaining this,” I sign, my motions sharp and angry. My father doesn’t so much as flinch. His gray eyes, hard as steel, rest on me with the kind of patience that only makes my anger burn more hotly.

He leans back in the couch. His fingers tap against the armrest, deliberate and controlled.

“Takeshi Mori.” I spell the name like a curse word. I’m fighting to remain steady, to look composed like Papa, not like I’m about to down this whole drink and then throw the glass through the window.

It was him the whole fucking time. Kaiju.

The masked man who visited my bedroom the other night, and fingered me, and made me come, and touched me like no one else ever has, and sprayed his cum across my ass, and then had me lick his fingers clean, was *Takeshi fucking Mori*.

The enemy.

A monster.

It makes me want to scream, throw up, explode, or all three, in whatever order possible.

“You can’t really expect me to go through with this.”

Papa doesn’t answer right away. He just studies me, his gaze razor sharp, dissecting me like I’m one of the enemies he’s always two steps ahead of.

“He’s dangerous,” I motion, my eyes pleading. “He’s a fucking psychopath. He’s unstable. And he’s…” My throat tightens.

He’s the man who pinned me to my bed and whispered filthy things in my ear that I’ve tried to forget and failed.

“And?” Kolya prompts, his voice a low growl. “He’s powerful, *Koshka*. He—”

“Please don’t use cute nicknames to placate me right now. I’m not a fucking child.”

A small smile curls my father’s lips, but he nods slowly.

“I wasn’t trying to 'placate' you, daughter,” he says quietly. “Just habit, apologies. I agree, he’s unpredictable, but that might be exactly what we need.”

“What *we* need?” I sign, incredulous. “You’re talking about handing me over to a lunatic. A man who…” I shake my head. “A man who would

sooner burn the world down than play by the rules."

Papa leans forward slowly, deliberately, resting his forearms on his knees. For the first time tonight I see a flicker of something in his eyes that isn't cold calculation. "You're right," he says evenly. "Takeshi Mori *is* a lunatic. But he's a lunatic with something to prove. If he's proving it on our side, that makes him controllable."

I snort. "Controllable? Did you see the way he walked in here tonight? He doesn't bow to anyone, least of all *us*."

Kolya smirks dangerously. "Not yet, no."

I stare at him, my pulse pounding. I've always known my father was a master strategist, but this… This is madness, even though a small, traitorous part of me understands his rationale. Marrying Takeshi *would* end the Cold War between the Ishida-kai and the Mori-kai and stabilize the delicate balance of power in Tokyo's underworld. And it *would* secure my place as the leader of the Ishida-kai.

It would also chain me to a man who has already torn me apart in ways I can't admit to anyone.

"This isn't just about the Mori-kai," Papa says, interrupting my spiraling thoughts. "It's about you. You're my heir, Katarina. This world…" He gestures vaguely, his expression tightening briefly. "This world is not kind to women who lead alone. You know that. The *captains* know that. If you want their loyalty, you need to give them something they can't question. A husband. Even if he's an obvious lunatic and an even more obvious puppet."

"I don't need a husband to lead," I sign viciously.

"No," he agrees calmly. "You don't. But you need one if you want to be followed without question." He sighs. "This thing we don't like to talk about… It's still going to happen, *Koshka,*" he says quietly.

This time, I like that he used my nickname.

"You have the best doctors on earth working with you," I sign. "You're going to be fine."

“Goddamn right I am,” he grins. “But, this tumor on my spine… It’s complex, and the doctors have cautioned me as such. I’m not *dying*, Katarina. But I may be incapacitated for longer than we’d like. If that happens, this empire cannot be left without someone helming the wheel. That someone needs to be you. And the realities of our world dictate that *you won’t be able to do it alone*.”

I look away, my gaze landing on the bookshelves lining the walls, on the heavy curtains drawn tight over the windows, anywhere but on Papa. He’s right, and it infuriates me. I’ve spent my entire life fighting to prove myself and earn my place at the table. And now, it still comes down to this. To needing a *man*.

“Why him?” I sign finally, my brow furrowed. “Why not someone else? Someone less…unhinged.”

“Because he’s a perfect wildcard,” Kolya says simply. “He’s dangerous, yes, but also strategic. He’s already proven that tonight. You marrying him would do more than end the war. It would keep our enemies guessing. No one would dare move against us if they thought the Mori-kai were in our corner. Much as I loathe to admit it, they’re arguably the second most powerful family in this city.”

I shake my head, swallowing the lump in my throat. “This isn’t pretend, Papa. It’s my life. My future. You’re asking me to attach myself to a man who…” I trail off, unable to find the words.

“It *is* pretend,” Papa growls. “You’re smart enough to know that. This isn’t about love or commitment. It’s about *power*. You play your role, he plays his. That’s all.”

I look away. “If he tries to fucking touch me…” I sign angrily.

Papa's eyes narrow slightly. “He won’t lay a goddamn finger on you, I promise you that,” he hisses.

Except he already has, I think. *Three of them*.

I rise from my chair, the anger bubbling inside me threatening to spill over.

“I need to think about this,” I sign stiffly.

“You know I love you, right?” Papa says quietly.

I nod glumly.

“Don’t ever forget it, *Koshka*.”

He doesn’t stop me as I turn on my heel and leave the room, the door shutting behind me with a heavy thud.

The hallways of the estate feel oppressively narrow as I make my way to my room. Furrcules is already curled up at the foot of my bed, his striped fuzzy belly rising and falling with each slumbering breath. I smirk when I see the scraps of meat littering the floor.

Yeah, Nina was *definitely* in here earlier, buying his love and getting some quality cuddles in with steak tips.

I pick up the bits, toss them, then sit on the edge of the mattress, my mind a storm of emotions I can’t sort through.

Kaiju is Takeshi Mori. Takeshi is Kaiju.

Fuck. Me.

The man who chased me through the shadows, who touched me in ways I can’t forget…

Is the man who now wants to claim me as his *wife*.

I press my hands to my face, trying to steady my breathing.

I’ve faced enemies before. Men twice my size, armed to the teeth. But this is different. This isn’t a fight I can win with a blade or a gun. This is something deeper, darker.

And I don’t know if I’m ready for it. At all.

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7

TAKESHI

THE BASEMENT of the Mori compound smells like oil and blood. The oil is from the select cars and handful of bikes I moved here from Kyoto when Kenzo went ahead and pulled the trigger on this place.

The blood?

That's from a more immediate and present source.

Higashi groans where he's tied to the chair, blood dripping down his face and pooling beneath him like he's a broken spigot. It's poetic, really, the way his body slouches, the gasps of pain escaping his lips.

He looks fucking pathetic. Like a worm. No, less than a worm.

A fucking snitch.

Beneath the bruises and blood, his expression alternates between defiance and terror as I loom over him.

"I'm curious, Higashi," I growl quietly. "How *the fuck* did you think I wouldn't find out?"

Higashi bleats in terror, like a farm animal about to be slaughtered.

"You really thought you could sell out your own brotherhood, to an active enemy no less, and get away with it?" I murmur, crouching down to his level. The steel-toed boot of my left foot rests against his knee, applying

just enough pressure to make him wince. He’s shaking now, the sputtering sound of his breath reminding me of an engine that’s about to die.

“I didn’t—" Higashi chokes, his voice a watery mess of snot and pleading. “Please…Takeshi-sama…”

I smile, slow and deliberate. It’s the kind of smile that makes men wet themselves.

No, really. I’ve seen it happen.

“Didn’t *what*?” I whisper. “Didn’t sell out your boss? Didn’t betray your family to a woman? What was it, Higashi? Did she send you a dirty picture of herself? Did you have a little crush? Or was it just for the money? And don’t fucking lie to me, Higashi. I know every word you said, every move you made.” I press down harder with my boot until he cries out, his screams echoing around the basement like music.

Higashi is garbage. Not just because I know he’s a fucking sellout now. He was garbage *before* Katarina paid him a tidy sum of money for insider information about our organization.

Because *before* Higashi discovered his new favorite pastime of pocketing bribes and selling out his brothers, he had a nifty little hobby of beating the shit out of women.

Girlfriends, the woman who lived down the hall from him, girls working at hostess bars. He hid this, of course—I mean it’s not like I knew and decided to just let it be.

Fuck that.

But after I discovered that Katarina knew how to get into our initiation the other night—where to be and when, how to dress to blend in—because of Higashi and his big fat mouth, I dug up every fucking skeleton in his closet.

Yes: garbage. The world’s better off without him, and he knows it.

I know it, too, which is why he’s leaving here tonight in a body bag.

I tap the bloodied wrench against my palm thoughtfully and stand up, rolling my shoulders. Higashi whimpers, the sound fading into the distant

hum of my thoughts as my mind wanders.

I turn to survey the garage I've been setting up down here, now that the Mori-kai is establishing a more permanent, powerful presence here in Tokyo.

Motorcycles. Engines. Building something powerful with my bare hands brings me satisfaction—the pure, raw thrill of creating something that hums with power and is under your control. That's what it feels like when an engine roars to life. When a plan comes together.

Katarina Ishida. My little prey.

My *plan*.

The thought of her sends a rush of raw heat through me, dark and all-consuming. I picture her face—the heart-shaped mouth, the prominent cheekbones. The gray eyes, wide and startled, her lips, parted in shock when I pinned her to her bed the other night.

She's beautiful in a way that's dangerous, in a way that makes men do stupid things. *I* know better than to be so stupid, but still…

There's something about her that keeps crawling under my skin, scratching and demanding more.

"Takeshi."

Hana's voice slices through the basement like a blade, and I glance over my shoulder to see her standing at the bottom of the stairs. Her bleached-blonde hair hangs in twin braids over her shoulders, her expression calm despite the grisly scene before her.

My sister has seen worse. Hell, she's helped me *clean up* worse.

"You're making a mess," she says, folding her arms over her chest.

I shrug, glancing at Higashi. "I thought it was time to break the new place in."

Hana shoots me a look. "Tak."

I exhale slowly. "I'm in control, all right? This is…necessary."

“For what he did, or for you?” she murmurs quietly.

“Little of column A, little of column B?”

My twin frowns. “Tak, come on—”

“I’m *kidding*, Hana.”

Sort of. Mostly.

“It’s because of him slipping secrets to the fucking enemy. If that isn't enough for you, feel free to boot up the laptop over there and read all about his hobby of re-tooling girls’ faces with his fists.”

Hana’s eyes darken. Her gaze slips past me, zeroing in on Higashi.

“That true, motherfucker?” she says coldly.

I chuckle. Hana never disappoints. She can be the tether that keeps me from slipping entirely over the cliff into the darkness. But she can also bring the fucking fury when it needs to be brought.

Higashi sobs, spit and blood dribbling down his chin as he trembles against his bonds.

Hana walks past me, stopping to look down at Higashi. Her lip curls in disgust. “Coward,” she spits before turning back to me. “What do we know about the infiltration?”

I tilt my head at Higashi. “I got everything I need from him.”

“Yeah, but who was the spy?”

“Just…one of their guys,” I lie, not understanding why. “I handled it, Hana.”

Oh, and *handle it*—or her, rather—I did.

“Was it a direct order from Kolya, though? Because if it was, that's totally different from just one of their people trying to scope out our new compound.”

There’s a zero percent chance that Kolya knows his daughter snuck into our initiation the other night.

ZEE. ROW.

Kolya has spent the last thirteen years hiding his darling daughter away from the world and erasing any mention of her from before that. It’s so extreme that if you ask around the various underworld circles of Tokyo, people aren’t even really sure if he ever *had* a daughter at all. Or maybe he did, but she’s dead now. Or maybe not.

Hell, I wasn’t even sure what to believe myself, until I started the machinations that brought us here, and to tonight's earlier events.

AKA, my indecent proposal to marry Katarina Ishida.

Which—shit—I haven’t actually found the time yet to mention to my family.

I pull my attention back to Hana. “Was there something you needed, by the way?”

“Aside from making sure you weren’t…you know…” She peers at me.

“Sliding into *American Psycho* territory?”

“Your words,” she mutters.

“I’m not.”

Not at this exact *moment*, at least. Nor today…probably.

“Glad we’ve cleared that up,” she smirks.

Ugh, she’s smiling a lot these days. I blame her fiancé Damian, AKA the nephew of Kir Nikolayev, the Mori-kai’s Bratva ally. Though I will begrudgingly admit that despite taking away my twin sister's sullenness that I used to delight in, he *does* make her happy.

Like, really, *really* fucking happy.

“Oh, there’s something else,” Hana says, raising a brow to me. “Kenzo wants to talk to you.”

“When?”

“…Now?”

I glance at the burbling, sobbing Higashi. Then I turn back to my sister.

“I’ll finish up here,” I say easily, as if I’m ending a work call instead of carrying out an execution. “Tell Caesar that I’ll see him after I clean up.”

She nods, glancing past me again to frown at Higashi. “Tak.”

“Yeah?”

“Just… Get it done, okay? No…you know.”

My lips curl. “Trophies?”

She sighs, shaking her head. “See you upstairs.”

She leaves without another word, her footsteps light as she heads back up the stairs.

For a second, I ignore the sniveling man behind me and let my gaze drag across the garage I’ve built down here: the cars, the bikes.

I grin.

Akira would have fucking *loved* this place.

Higashi looks up at me as I turn back to him, desperation on his ruined face. I crouch again, close enough that he can hear me, even through my voice is quiet.

“I mean, I *was* going to take an ear. Or, you know…something.” I exhale through my lips. “But, you can thank my sister for ruining that one. Anyway, this is where it ends for you,” I tell him. “You believe in reincarnation?”

“W-what?!” Higashi sobs.

“Do you believe you will be reborn again after death.”

“I-I…I don’t know!” Higashi wails.

“Well, if you figure it out in the next, oh, seven seconds, and decide it’s a yes?”

I stand and raise my arm.

“Don’t fuck up next time.”

The wrench connects with a sickening crunch, and the basement walls swallow his final scream.

* * *

I SHOWER in scalding water afterward. The blood, the grime, it all slides down the drain, swirling into nothingness. By the time I change into clean clothes and head upstairs, the Mori compound feels quiet, almost peaceful.

We’ve only been in the house for a month, but it already feels like home: a fortress hidden in the city’s heart. The mansion itself is a marvel of modern architecture, sharp lines of steel and glass that reflect Tokyo’s neon skyline. The basement is a different story, but that’s intentional.

I walk through the main hall, my footsteps muffled by the thick Persian rugs Kenzo insisted on. My brother’s got a taste for luxury. I don’t mind it. I'll admit, there’s something satisfying about walking through a house that screams power and control.

“Hey, you wanted to see…”

I trail off as I step into Kenzo’s office and see *all* my siblings there. Kenzo is standing by the windows, his jaw tight and a glass of whiskey in his hand. Annika, his wife, sits at his desk nearby. When I step in, she glances at me, then to Kenzo, then back at me.

Okaaaay?

Mal, our cousin, sits at one side of the room, with Freya on his knee. Damian’s back in New York on business for his uncle this week so Hana sits alone, her warmth from earlier gone, replaced by something cold and maybe a little worried.

Shit. What’d I fucking miss?

I don’t have to wait long for the big reveal. Kenzo knocks his head back, downing the rest of his drink before slamming his glass down. He whirls on me, his expression sharp, his face livid.

“Are you fucking high?” he snaps. “What were you *thinking*?!”

Aha. It would appear word has reached the rest of them about what I pulled earlier tonight. Obviously, I’d rather have told them myself. But here we are. And judging from their faces, this toothpaste won't exactly go back into the tube.

“We had *plans*, Tak!” Kenzo spits. “Learn Kolya’s ways. Cultivate contacts within his organizations. Map out their operations. Find the weak spots. You told me you’d found a way inside. You didn't tell me it was fucking *this*!”

I smirk, dropping into the leather armchair across from him. “First of all, *chill*. Secondly, am I missing something?” I arch a brow at my brother. “I just stormed Normandy, defeated the Spanish Armada and sacked Rome, all without lifting a finger or firing a shot. You’re fucking *welcome*, by the way.”

Kenzo’s hand tightens around his glass. “What you just did, Tak, is grabbed the fucking tiger by the tail. You better learn to hold on tight or to run like hell.”

“Come *on*,” I reply, stretching my arms out lazily. “Marrying Katarina ends the war. Full stop. Kolya doesn’t have a choice, believe me. All that research? The planning?” I roll my eyes. “Kenzo, I outplayed him. Period.”

Kenzo’s glare is murderous. “You didn’t outplay anyone. You’re forgetting Kolya Ishida is the most ruthless bastard in Tokyo. You think you’re so clever, but all you’ve done is paint a target on your back—and hers, I should add, if you even give a shit.”

My chest twists sharply at that. But I shove the feeling down and lean forward, my smirk fading.

“I’m not afraid of Kolya,” I say coldly. “Or of his men. They think I’m insane, and they’re right. That’s why I’ll win.”

“Tak…”

Hana is looking at me, her brow furrowed. “Why does it feel like you’re making this more personal that it needs to be?”

I scowl. “What?”

“You’re making this personal. I can see it in your fucking eyes.”

I don’t answer. Because she’s right.

This isn’t just about Katarina. Or even Kolya.

It’s about Akira.

It’s taken me a long time to follow the trail. I’ve waited for years for this—for a chance to rip apart the man who killed my friend. Now, I have a name.

Kolya. Fucking. Ishida.

My…*fascination* with Katarina is no accident. She’s his blood, his pride, his perfect little heir. I want to see how badly she’ll break before he does too. How far I’ll have to push before Kolya Ishida falls to his knees and begs.

Kenzo sighs heavily. “How…set in stone is this?”

“When you barge into a guy's dinner party, insult his guests, drop a beer cooler full of his dismembered enemy on the table, and ask for his daughter’s hand in marriage, and he says *yes*?” I spread my arms. “I don’t know, Kenzo. How likely is a do-over in that scenario?”

He shakes his head, shoving his fingers through his hair. “You made this bed—”

“Which I fully intend to sleep in. Will you chill out?”

“*Fine*,” he mutters. “Marry the daughter of the man we’re in a Cold War with. Just don’t come crying to me when she guts you in your sleep.”

The thought of Katarina holding a knife to my throat sparks something wicked in my chest. “I’d like to see her try,” I grin.

Kenzo mutters something in Japanese, but I can't really hear him. I lean back in my chair as the rest of them start talking tensely about "what I've done".

Me, I let my thoughts drift. To earlier today. To a few nights before.

To Katarina, and the hunger for her throbbing inside me.

My future wife…

Soon, I'll know the truth about what happened to Akira. When I do, I'll rub Kolya's fucking face in it.

…*After* I decapitate him, that is.

One step at a time. One move closer to victory.

The engine's already running. There's no stopping it now.

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8

KATARINA

HOSPITALS ARE TOO QUIET. It makes every sound sharper, every breath heavier.

I sit in the hard plastic chair in the waiting room, my foot tapping nervously on the white tile floor as the fluorescent lights buzz overhead. Nina sits beside me, pretending to scroll on her phone, though I know she's as on edge as I am.

Ryu stands near the wall, hands behind his back, his expression as stoic as ever, though the tension in his jaw gives him away.

Two hours ago, Papa collapsed in the kitchen, writhing in what looked like immeasurable pain, which is obviously when we rushed him to the hospital. He's sedated now: they say it was most likely the tumor on his spine pinching an especially sensitive nerve or putting pressure on the spinal cord.

I hate seeing my father like this: mortal, fallible, *human*. Kolya Ishida should not be lying in a hospital bed, pumped full of painkillers because of a tumor eating away at his spine. He's supposed to be an indestructible force of nature that no man would dare challenge.

But… Here we are.

"The doctors said he's stabilized, Kat," Nina murmurs, as if reading my thoughts. Her voice is soft, but I can hear the thread of reassurance in it, trying to calm me down. I don't respond. I can't. My mind is too jumbled,

filled with what-ifs and maybes. I just stare at the clock on the wall, watching the seconds tick by like drops of water dripping from a leaky faucet.

Ryu clears his throat, breaking the silence. “Kolya-sama is in good hands here, Katarina,” he says, his deep voice steady and deliberate.

I nod numbly, staring at a spot on the pristine white floor.

Ryu coughs delicately. “You still have the engagement party to attend tonight,” he says.

The words land like a punch to the gut and I whip my head up to glare at him. As if my father’s life dangling by a thread isn’t enough, this evening I have to pretend to celebrate my impending marriage to a man who…who…

I don’t even know how to finish that thought, and it seems to be an ongoing issue. Takeshi Mori is a psychopath. The enemy. He’s also the man who chased me, pinned me down and whispered things that ignited a darkness inside me I can’t explain.

I slam my heel against the floor. “I’m not leaving yet,” I sign sharply, my hands moving with practiced speed.

“Katarina—”

“I said no.”

Nina puts a steadying hand on my arm. “Ryu’s right, Kat. Kolya would want you to go. You know that.”

I jerk my arm away, glaring at her. “He’d want me to stay here,” I sign back, stubbornness curling in my gut. “To make sure he’s okay.”

Which is total bullshit. Papa wouldn’t just “want” me to go back and continue with the engagement party as planned. He’d *insist* on it.

“What happens if you don’t show up tonight?” Ryu counters, his voice like a blade. “The captains will question your commitment. Your father’s empire comes first. Always.”

I grit my teeth, a bitter retort burning on my tongue. I know he’s right.

The empire comes first. *Always*.

“I’ll stay here and finish up with Dr. Yoon,” Nina adds. “Like they said, there’s a chance your dad will be discharged tonight. I’ll try to get an update and see if that’s still an option, or if they’ll be keeping him."

I nod numbly, squeezing her hand before turning to her.

“Thank you,” I gesture in a small way.

“Of course,” Nina says quietly. “See you at the house at the party.”

* * *

BACK AT HOME, my room feels like a prison as I pace the length of it, the plush carpet muffling my footsteps. The gown I’m supposed to wear tonight —white, floor-length, with thin straps and a plunging back—hangs ready in my changing room, mocking me with its delicate silk and detailed embellishments. I’m supposed to put that on, smile for the cameras, and pretend I’m not marrying a monster?

So fucking stupid.

I don’t even know why I’m pacing. Actually, I do: if I sit still, my thoughts will catch up to me, and I’m not ready to deal with them.

I yank my shirt over my head, kick off my jeans, and then lose my bra before I step over to the pearl-white gown and glare daggers at it. The fact that it’s so fancy and showy pisses me off even more, like it’s highlighting how phony this whole thing is.

I’m legit contemplating going downstairs in jeans and a t-shirt when the sound of a door clicking open stops me dead in my tracks.

I spin around, my blood turning to ice and a gasp choking in my throat as Takeshi steps into the changing room like he owns it.

It, and everything *in it*.

My face explodes with heat. My arms awkwardly cover my breasts, my hips twisting as if to hide my panties from his smug gaze as well.

What the *fuck*?!

He pauses, leaning casually against the doorframe with that infuriating smirk curling his lips. He's dressed in all black again—button-down shirt, jacket, slacks—and his dark eyes rake over me like he's cataloging every inch of skin I haven't covered yet.

"You could knock," I sign sharply, grabbing the closest thing I can find—a heeled shoe—and hurling it at him.

Takeshi catches it mid-air, chuckling as he tosses it back. I go to grab it on instinct before I realize that's exactly why he threw it back and dodge it instead.

Asshole.

"Get out," I motion testily.

He steps further into the room, his movements deliberate, predatory. "Relax, princess. I've seen a woman in panties before." His lips curl. "And lest we forget, I've seen you in *far* more compromising positions…"

Heat explodes across my face and neck as I turn away from him, still covering my breasts with one arm.

"Go fuck yourself," I sign coldly.

"Is that an offer?"

Wait. Did he…*understand* that?

Takeshi grins wickedly at the shock on my face, though he says nothing.

"You know sign language?" I demand, my fingers moving stiffly, too stunned to form the words fluidly.

"Enough to understand you," he replies with a shrug, coming closer.

I take a step back, my heart pounding. "Stay over there," I sign, nodding with my chin.

“Or what?” His voice is silk-wrapped steel as he closes the gap, his dark eyes locked with mine. “You’ll scream for help?”

“Fuck you,” I sign angrily, my hands moving fast enough to sting. “Ever heard of consent? As in, what I didn't give the other night?”

Takeshi’s smirk doesn’t waver. “You’re the one who was looking for a rape-play partner on the internet,” he growls, his voice low. “And I never heard a safe word.”

My face goes hot, fury sparking through me like a live wire. “*BECAUSE I CAN’T SPEAK,*” I sign furiously, the movements almost sharp enough to cut.

Takeshi's gaze is unnervingly calm. “Would you have, though?” he murmurs, so close I can feel the heat radiating off him. “If you could?”

My throat tightens and my hands tremble slightly as I hold his gaze, unable to look away. And then, to my horror, my fingers falter. Because I don’t know what the answer is.

Takeshi’s smile darkens, satisfaction flickering in his eyes as he steps back. “*Innnteresting,*” he murmurs.

“Excuse me?” I sign, glaring at him.

“Ability to voice a safe word aside, you loved what I did to you the other night,” Takeshi says bluntly. “You can’t hide that. I know your dark secrets, princess.”

“Stop calling me that.” I sign the words like a slap.

Takeshi ignores me. “Why can’t you speak?” he asks, his tone suddenly serious.

I give him a hard look. “None of your damn business.”

“You weren’t born that way,” he presses, his voice calm but insistent.

“Says?” I sign.

“Says the picture of you in the school choir in your bedroom.” He smirks faintly, but then his eyes turn dark. “What happened?"

Life happened. Life decided to shock and terrify me by locking me in the dark for a week, where I cried and screamed so much that I lost the ability even to whisper.

“Speaking is overrated,” I sign sarcastically.

“So is consent.”

Takeshi's eyes drag over me like he can see straight through my skin. “You’re easier to read than you think, princess. You act like you hate me, but part of you… I think you like this.”

I straighten, glaring at him, my hands gesturing before I can stop myself. “Go to hell.”

He grins darkly. “Care to come and keep me company?”

The tension between us stretches, vibrating like a taut wire. Takeshi takes another step forward and I instinctively back into the dresser, my heart pounding. He stops a breath away, close enough that I can feel the heat of him.

“Get the fuck away from me,” I motion.

“Are you always this hostile?” he murmurs, his voice low and taunting.

“Only when assholes barge into my room uninvited,” I sign furiously.

His eyes flash. “And yet you haven’t told me to leave.”

I open my mouth as if to argue but my hands freeze mid-movement, and his smile widens like he’s just won a silent war.

Suddenly Takeshi whirls toward the low, guttural growl behind him, tensing like a predator surprised by something even higher up on the food chain. His gaze drops to where Furrcules is standing in the doorway, all fluff and menace, tiny teeth bared in a warning snarl.

“What the *fuck* is that?” Takeshi mutters.

I use the fact that he’s distracted to turn and snatch the gown from its hanger and throw it on. I let it fall down my body, covering my nudity before I walk over to my tiger cub. I crouch down and scratch behind his

ears, feeling Furrcules relax under my touch before I glance up at a scowling Takeshi.

“A turtle, obviously,” I sign with a sarcastic grin.

“You have a fucking tiger?” Takeshi grunts, his eyes still narrowed as he stares at the animal warily, like it might leap for his throat.

Note to self: see about training Furrcules to do exactly that.

“It’s a baby tiger,” I sign back, adding a mockingly sweet head tilt.

“Baby tigers have a pesky habit of turning into grown-up tigers, who have a pesky habit of *eating people*,” Takeshi growls.

“What’s the matter?” I sign, my lips curling into a smirk as I rise to my feet. “Scared of a little pussy?”

Takeshi’s head snaps toward me. “You really think you’re amusing, don’t you?” he mutters.

I arch a brow. “Hilarious, actually.”

He shakes his head. “Let’s be clear about one thing, princess.”

I scowl at the nickname, my hands already moving in irritation. “Stop calling me that.”

Takeshi ignores me, stepping closer again. “What? Princess?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Because I’m not one,” I sign back tersely.

“You’re the daughter of a Yakuza king, you’re kept in a tower, you’re marrying the villain, and you have a fuzzy sidekick. You’re a fucking princess, princess.”

“Well, you’re the farthest thing from Prince Charming,” I fire back.

Takeshi leans in, his voice dropping to a low, gravelly whisper as his smirk sharpens, becomes feral, making the space between us feel too small. “Are

you always this much of a brat?”

“Are you always this much of an asshole?”

His chuckle is dark and low as he steps even closer, until I’m forced to tilt up my chin to maintain eye contact. “You’re going to have to do a lot better than that if you want to scare me off.”

Before I can respond, he leans down, whispering in my ear.

“Let’s be clear about one thing, princess,” he murmurs. “Prince Charming or not, I’m not here to rescue you from the evil wizard. I’m not here to sweep you off your feet”

His long, strong fingers wrap around my throat and his lips dip to brush against my earlobe, sending a shivering ripple down my spine.

“I’m here to *conquer you*.”

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9

TAKESHI

THE ISHIDA ESTATE hums with low laughter, polite applause, and the clink of expensive crystal glassware.

The engagement celebration is extravagant, with power oozing from every corner and guest. Lanterns cast a gold and crimson glow over the stone pathways in the courtyard and the koi pond rippling like liquid glass. Guards patrol quietly, so out of the way you don't even know they're there.

It's a perfectly orchestrated display of strength and tradition. That's what Kolya does—he puts on a show.

Even if he's, strangely, not *attending* this particular performance.

I've already seen Katarina—via Nina—explain to more than a few guests that her father has been "unfortunately pulled away for work". I don't buy it for a second.

It's common knowledge that Kolya has a disdain for the Yakuza world, despite being virtually at the top of that particular food chain. I'm guessing that sourness comes from his history with that side of his heritage, i.e., his grandfather banishing his mother when she fell for a Russian man. Interestingly, it's been said that Kolya has the same disdain for the Bratva world for doing the same to his father, for falling for a Japanese woman.

But despite all that, Kolya knows how to work the room like a virtuoso. And he understands perfectly the niceties and nuances of this image game we all play.

He'd *never* miss his daughter's engagement party, even if the whole thing is bullshit and he probably hates the groom, i.e., me.

Which begs the question: *where the fuck is he*?

For the moment, I tuck that question aside as I grab a drink from a passing waiter, sip it, and smile a predatory smile at anyone staring at me with a wrinkled nose and a wary expression.

There's a *lot* of wrinkled noses and wary expressions.

The rest of my siblings are here as well. But none of them, not even Mal, really has the same…*reputation* that I do. Even Damian, for all his violent lunacy, doesn't get the same reproachful stares from the crowd.

They look at me out of the corners of their eyes like I'm the crazy motherfucker who slipped in through the back door, unsure yet if I'm going to do something explosive. That's fine. I didn't come here for their approval.

I came to get in deep.

To worm my way in.

And to uncover the truth about Akira.

That's what drives me, even as the suit I'm wearing chafes my skin and the polite smiles fray my nerves. I drift through the crowd like smoke, my presence undeniable. I'm not here to bid for a seat at the table—I'm here to take the table apart, piece by piece.

And these men have no idea.

* * *

THE FIRST ISHIDA-KAI ally I approach is older, gray dusting his temples and complex *irezumi* tattoos peeking out from the cuffs of his suit. Yamamoto, if memory serves. I've done my homework. He's loyal to Kolya, but practical. He'll listen if what I'm offering makes sense.

I’m not saying my plan is to start subtly peeling Kolya’s allies away and turn them into *my* allies…

…But I’m not saying that's *not* my plan, either.

“Beautiful evening,” I say, offering him a smile that’s just friendly enough to disarm.

He nods warily, his posture stiff. “Indeed.”

“Kolya-san has built something truly extraordinary here,” I continue, gesturing around us. “A legacy that will last generations. But you and I both know legacies require careful, steady hands to protect them.”

Yamamoto regards me carefully, weighing every word. “And you think those hands are yours?”

“I think they could be *ours*,” I reply, my voice measured. “Your loyalty runs deep, Yamamoto-san. And loyalty deserves a reward. Under my guidance—under our partnership—the Ishida-kai will grow. This city will belong to us in ways it never has before. And with growth comes rewards…” I smile. “Especially to those whom I call friend.”

His brows lift slightly. “Bold words from a man who has not yet married the boss’s daughter.”

“Bold words are what built this empire in the first place,” I counter. “And bold actions will protect it.”

Before Yamamoto can respond, a familiar voice interrupts us.

“What the fuck do you think you’re doing?”

I turn leisurely to see Ryu, Kolya’s top advisor, standing behind me. His posture is rigid, his glare hot enough to leave burn marks. He’s dressed impeccably, his black suit sharp enough to cut, but there’s nothing elegant about the anger radiating off him.

Ryu and my family have crossed paths before. The bullet wound in his gut is a lasting reminder of that encounter, though I doubt it’s a very happy one.

“Ryu-san,” I say smoothly, as if I’m genuinely pleased to see him. “We were just discussing the future.”

“The future?” Ryu repeats, his voice a low growl. He doesn’t look at Yamamoto. His anger is directed squarely at me. “You are not part of this family’s future. You are not part of this family at all, actually. You’re a fucking *gaijin* outsider.” His lips curl darkly. “You don’t belong here.”

Even if my face stays neutral, the word cuts. It always does.

Gaijin. Foreigner. Intruder. It’s a word I’ve heard since I was old enough to understand what I was. Half-Japanese, half-Norwegian. Too tall, too European, too different for some of the more old-school—and yes, I'll say it, *racist*—corners of the Yakuza world.

I smile at Ryu mildly, letting the insult slide over me.

“Let’s get one thing clear,” I say softly, stepping closer. The room feels smaller, hushed, like everyone is waiting for what comes next. “I’m marrying Kolya’s daughter. I’m not auditioning, or interviewing for a position. I’m about to become your fucking *boss*.”

Ryu’s jaw tightens stonily.

I lean in, my voice low. “As such, *you* will need to interview to keep *your* current position. If you have a problem with that, I suggest you take it up with Kolya.” My brows knit as I swivel my head from side to side, darting my eyes around the room. “Now, where *is* he…?”

The tension between Ryu and me crackles, the air humming with the threat of violence. I can see his muscles coil and his nostrils flare as he fights to keep himself in check.

But he knows he can’t touch me. Not here. Not tonight.

So he just straightens, his face a mask of dark rage. “You’re going to regret attempting whatever it is you’re trying to pull with this bullshit,” he mutters, his voice trembling with barely restrained anger. Then he turns sharply on his heel and storms away, his footsteps echoing through the room.

I watch him go with a satisfied smile.

Takeshi: one. Ryu: zero.

Your move, dickhead.

I turn to resume my admittedly blatant attempt to buy Yamamoto's loyalty. But, probably wisely for him, he's already backed away, clearly cooling to the idea as he disappears into the crowd.

Whatever. There are plenty more like him.

A sharp jab to my shoulder makes me flinch as I whirl. My jaw unclenches when I find not Ryu itching for a fight but *Katarina*, glaring up at me, her gray eyes blazing with fury.

It would be a whole lot more threatening if she didn't look like *absolute sin* in that fucking gown.

Off-white, down to her ankles, thin shoulder straps, a plunging back. Her long, coppery-blonde hair is pinned up, though not particularly elaborately.

She's good at cleaning up without looking like she's playing princess. Katarina clearly understands the world she moves in, and how that world is especially unforgiving toward a woman alone in its midst.

My eyes travel the length of the delicate line of her neck, but there's nothing delicate about the way she's looking at me.

"You do not get to come in here and fuck with my family," she signs furiously.

"*Our* family, sweetheart," I correct, letting my voice drop dangerously.

Her hands move sharply as she signs. *Don't.*

I grin. "But we're going to—"

She cuts me off with a glare and stalks away before I can finish the thought.

She's furious. I love it. That fire, that refusal to bow… Kolya might see a dutiful heir when he looks at her, but I see a spark. A challenge.

She’s going to fight me every step of the way.

Good.

The party drags on for hours, but I stay, watching, listening. Kolya doesn’t make an appearance once. But his captains and allies are here. By the time the celebration starts to wind down, I’ve planted seeds with half a dozen men. Some of them are too wary to give me anything beyond polite nods, but a few—Yamamoto included—are willing to listen. They’re loyal to Kolya, but they’re even more loyal to survival. If I convince them that aligning with me is their best shot at staying on top, they’ll come around.

Everything I’m doing tonight is calculated. Strategic. It's all a means to an end.

The fall of Kolya Ishida.

But first… I need his daughter.

* * *

I FIND Katarina standing by the koi pond, gazing into the water as if it holds all the answers. The light from the lanterns casts a soft golden glow across her skin. I approach quietly, stopping a few feet away.

“You don’t look like someone who just got engaged,” I observe.

She stiffens but doesn’t turn. “Because I’m not.” Her hands move quickly above her shoulder, the gestures clipped. “This isn’t real. We both know that.”

“Real enough for them,” I reply, nodding toward the guests.

She finally turns to face me, her face stony. “What do you want from me?”

I step closer, until there’s only a breath of space between her body and mine. “I already told you,” I murmur. “*Everything*.”

Her eyes widen slightly, her breath catching deep in her throat. For a moment, neither of us moves. The tension coils tighter and tighter, until it

feels like the air itself might snap.

“I mean from the real me,” she signs tentatively. “Not that other one.”

I smile dangerously. “You mean the one that wanted me to chase her, pin her to the dirty ground and *fuck her*?” I purr, letting the last words meander through the air between us to caress her ears.

“That me doesn’t exist.”

I arch a brow. “I beg to differ. And I believe my *fingers* are ready to take the stand as star witnesses.”

Her face turns crimson as I bring three fingers to my mouth and dramatically lick them clean. Her gaze locks with mine for a moment, her throat working up and down soundlessly.

Then, suddenly, the spell breaks and Katarina steps back from me.

“Stay away from me,” she signs abruptly before she spins on her heel and marches away, either unaware or not caring that my eyes linger on the way her hips sway as she does.

I smile, slowly and deliberately.

Not a chance, princess.

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10

KATARINA

THIS "ENGAGEMENT" party feels like it’s never going to end. The hum of voices, the clink of glasses, the feeling of a thousand eyes burning into me—it’s fucking brutal.

I’ve perfected the art of smiling when I don’t want to, or nodding like I care what these people think of me. But tonight my patience is paper-thin, and I swear if Takeshi smirks at me one more fucking time, I might actually shove a fork in his eye.

Calm down, I tell myself, adjusting my gown as I move through the chaos and the crowd. I need a moment alone, a sliver of silence.

I skirt the edge of the gathering, slipping toward a quieter part of the room and a cluster of chairs set up near the wide glass windows. The koi pond outside shimmers in the moonlight, and for a second, I think how nice it would be to trade places with one of the fish.

“Katarina.”

I turn to see Hana Mori approaching. For a moment, her image in front of me blurs, replaced by the memory of the nightmare two months ago: two chairs, a burned-out office building, a see-saw board poised over nothing but air and ruins.

Her face is cleaner now, her hair sleek and done impeccably, but her eyes are the same as the ones that stared back at me across the beam, wide with

fear but unblinking, holding onto the same desperate shred of hope that I did.

We were hostages together, pawns in Miyamoto Katō's sick game hoping to pit our families against each other. If my family came first and tried to save me, the see-saw would tip, sending her tumbling to her death. If hers saved her first, I'd be the one to fall.

It's weird to realize we've gone through something like that together and yet haven't seen each other since that day, or know each other at all.

Hana stops a few feet away, smiling softly. "It's been…a while."

My fingers twitch at my sides. She watches my hands, and then, to my surprise, lifts hers, awkwardly but deliberately.

"I only know a little," she signs, a little clumsily. "But I can understand more than I can sign," she adds vocally.

It breaks me out of my stupor. I grin at her for a moment before we come together to hug for a second.

It's tough not to see that Hana is Takeshi's twin. She doesn't have his height, and her dark hair is bleached blonde. But their features, especially the eyes, are eerily similar. Like her brothers, Hana has a distinctly Japanese look, but with a hint of Norwegian, from their mother.

"Bet you'd never have guessed this is how we'd meet again," I sign dryly. When I see the confused look on her face, I hold up a finger, head to the bar, borrow a notepad and pen from the bartender, and walk back.

"Sorry," she groans. "I guess my signing isn't as good as I thought."

I shake my head, smiling. *No problem,* I write. Then I add what I signed before and pass the notebook to her.

She laughs. "No, can't say I would have guessed this would be our second meeting. But you have to admit, anything's better than the first."

AKA, when we were tied to chairs dangling above the abyss, wondering if the next sneeze would send both of us plunging to our deaths.

The service is much better this time, I write, making her snort a laugh.

"*Much* better," she smiles. "The venue is definitely an improvement, too."

You think? I write. *I was considering suggesting to my father that he remodel and go for a burned-out architectural hazard vibe*.

Hana grins, shaking her head. "I hope you're surviving my brother," she says with a playful roll of her eyes. "He has a talent for making people want to strangle him."

I snatch up the notepad and pencil. I manage to restrain myself and just scrawl "he's a little infuriating" on the page.

I mean, we're getting along. But Takeshi *is* her twin.

"Please—don't hold back on my account. I've known that dick my whole life. Serve that tea, girl."

Hey, she asked.

He's a fucking asshole, I scrawl across the page.

Luckily, Hana laughs. "I know how strange all of this must feel. But I'm glad this is ending the animosity between our families."

More like hiding or burying it, I think to myself.

"Me too," I sign back.

Hana and I end up grabbing a drink at the bar and finding out we've got even more in common than I would have thought. And ultimately, she's right: however fucked-up this arrangement is, it *does* end any potential bloodshed between our families. And that's nothing but good.

Eventually she gets pulled away, and I make my way to the long table set up on a low stage at the front of the room to leave my clutch at my seat. The place settings are meticulous, crystal glasses and polished silver catching the light just so—Papa spared no expense. Then my brows knit as I spot something.

There's an envelope on my plate.

It’s small and unmarked, cream-colored with a slight gold foil edge. I glance around. No one seems to be paying attention, so I lower myself into the chair and tear open the envelope, wondering if maybe it's a little note from Papa, since he’s not here.

The second my eyes land on the words inside, I realize it’s not from him.

You’re mine.

That’s all. No signature. No explanation. Just those two words scrawled in heavy black ink. I open the paper flat, my heart thudding as I glance around the room.

Takeshi.

He’s standing near the far side of the hall, talking to someone I don’t recognize. His posture is relaxed, that smug grin still on his face. When his dark eyes flick to me, something inside me coils tight. I can still feel the weight of his hands on me, the heat of his breath in my ear as he whispered things I’d be happy to forget.

Or at least, things I’m trying to *convince* myself that I’d be happy to forget.

Shivering, I pull my eyes away and glance back at the note, frowning. Did *he* put this here to fuck with me?

I glare at him across the room, willing him to turn and acknowledge the note in my hand, take credit for it. When he doesn’t, I give up and start to make the expected rounds of the party.

Circulating through the guests is a little like walking through a minefield. Every smile I make feels painted on, every answer rehearsed. Papa’s absence is noticed, of course.

“Business,” I keep telling everyone when asked, my expression unwavering. “You know how it is.”

Some nod, accepting the lie without further prodding. Others linger a beat too long, clearly trying to peek behind my carefully constructed mask. I just keep smiling. Keep moving.

Papa taught me well: never let them see your weakness.

“A big day,” a voice mutters in Russian behind me. “But it would appear not big enough to warrant your father making an appearance.”

Shit.

I turn, smiling and bowing to Sergey Vorobev. When plans changed—i.e., when Takeshi crashed that dinner party—Papa reached out to Sergey and politely informed him that the loose plan to marry me to Rodion was no longer on the table.

We never heard a thing back from him. Not a great sign that the message landed well—nor is the sour look on Sergey’s face.

Since Nina is circulating the party on her own, I’ve hung onto the pen and notepad I borrowed from the bartender earlier. I scrawl “My deepest apologies regarding your son, Mr. Vorobev. I know our empires could have done great things as a joined family. But we can still do those great things as allies, wouldn't you agree?”

Sergey reads it with a scowl on his face before grunting dismissively.

“Your father and I had a *deal*, Ms. Mori,” he growls.

“I appreciate that,” I write. “But my father wanted me to have a say in whom I married.”

It’s bullshit, obviously. But it's a better explanation than “your son is a drunk, rude piece of shit and I’d rather lick a public restroom doorknob than get hitched to him.”

Sergey snorts. “So, instead of my son, you choose to marry a ticking fucking time bomb?!” he spits.

I start to write a reply, but he jerks my hand away from the notepad.

“Where is your father, *malen’kaya printsessa*.”

Little princess.

Yeah, fuck you too, Sergey.

“Business called,” I scrawl.

“Get him back here,” Sergey mutters. “This insult has gone on long enough.”

I don’t immediately write my reply. I simply hold the pen and paper, letting my gaze stab into him, lingering until the moment becomes unbearably awkward.

“Mr. Vorobev,” I write. “I can apologize again for things not working out between your son and me. But I won’t apologize to you, or anyone else, for the choices I make of my own volition in service to my father’s empire. If you’d like to talk business, I’m standing right here, and I speak for my father. If you’re just here to complain, you can join the group of girlfriends and mistresses at the bar, bitching and moaning about having to share their Yakuza boyfriends tonight with those men’s actual *wives*.”

His face darkens as he reads my response. When his eyes drag back up to mine, his fury so eager to spill out, I turn around and walk away, leaving him stewing, knowing he won’t actually do shit.

I spot Ryu across the room, his face dark as he talks with Yamamoto and a few other men Takeshi had been hovering around earlier. I find Nina, and ask her to come translate for me as I march across the room toward the group of men, my stomach twisting slightly.

When we reach them, Ryu’s frown deepens. He eyes me carefully as I step forward, chin lifted.

“Neither my father’s wishes, plans, nor leadership is changing,” I sign, Nina translating aloud. “The Ishida-kai will continue as it always has. All this marriage does is shore up our alliances and stop this from escalating into a war nobody wants. That’s it. The empire comes first.”

The men murmur amongst themselves, echoing the “empire comes first” line that Papa is so fond of.

I turn to Yamamoto. “What was my dear fiancé talking to you about earlier?”

The older man shifts a little uncomfortably. “Ms. Ishida—”

“You have been allied with my father for years. I’d like an answer.”

Yamamoto exhales slowly, looking away. “I believe he was trying to… make friends with me, if you know what I mean.”

I do, but I’m not done with Yamamoto yet.

“No, I don’t,” I sign, waiting for Nina to translate. “Do you mean he was trying to fuck you?”

Yamamoto’s face darkens. “*Excuse me*?”

“Be. Specific.”

He coughs uncomfortably. “I believe he wanted us to be friends in the sense of forming an alliance within the alliance.”

That motherfucker.

We’re not even married yet, and he’s already trying to make side deals with my family’s top allies.

“Thank you for your honesty, Yamamoto-san.”

When the group disperses, Ryu lingers behind. He leans close, his voice low. “Takeshi is going to be a problem. I don’t trust him further than I could throw him.”

“Me either,” I sign back quickly. “He’s an opportunistic shit.”

“Who, specifically, are we talking about?”

I stiffen at the sound of Takeshi’s voice behind me. For a split second, I’m totally confused how he’s managed to insert himself into the conversation, before remembering that *somehow* the fucking psycho has learned a decent amount of sign language in the span of a week or two. Which is…weird.

But then, a thought curls the corners of my mouth. I smile fake-sweetly as I turn from Ryu to face my smug-as-fuck fiancé.

“Who do you think we’re talking about?” I sign. This time, it’s in *Japanese* Sign Language, as opposed to the American version I typically use, since it’s far more widely understood.

Takeshi tilts his head to the side, his eyes piercing into me. My grin widens.

Got you there, asshole.

I'm starting to turn back to Ryu when Takeshi clears his throat. “Well, you said ‘opportunistic shit'. I could only assume you were fawning over yours truly.”

I stiffen and my eyes snap back to Takeshi, who's grinning widely, though his eyes sparkle with black malice.

“Oopsie,” he sighs. “Seems I may have accidentally learned all your secret code languages.” He looks past me to Ryu. “Surely there’s a decrepit old house that needs haunting, or a bridge that’s in sore need of its troll back. Why don’t you run along and let me speak to my fiancée alone.”

I swear I can *hear* Ryu’s teeth grinding. But the man is, above anything else, utterly self-controlled, like a samurai. So even if he's looking at Takeshi like he wants to murder him with a rusty spoon, he barely moves a muscle in his face.

“Ms. Mori…” he growls quietly.

“I’ll be fine, Ryu,” I sign back, glancing at him and giving him the briefest roll of my eyes. “I'll take care of him. Thank you.”

Ryu bows stiffly, shooting Takeshi another lethal look before turning on his heel and marching away.

“Now…when you say *take care of him*…” Takeshi sidles closer. “Should I assume that includes your pretty mouth wrapped around my dick?”

“More like your ass wrapped around a *gun*, with a trigger I pull until the chamber is much, much lighter.”

Takeshi’s brows arch in amusement. “That was…graphic.”

“Can you just leave me the fuck alone?” I sign tersely.

“Not even married yet and already we need counseling,” he sighs.

“*You* certainly do,” I sign sarcastically, shooting him a glare. “Plus medication.”

Takeshi chuckles. “You have *no* idea, princess.”

“I think I can make an educated guess,” I fire back. “And don’t think that any of this means you can step on my toes,” I sign, my movements sharp.

“Meaning?”

I glare at him. “Meaning stay the hell away from my allies and stop trying to drag them to your side.”

“And here I thought what’s yours was mine, and what’s mine was yours, *dear*,” he smirks.

“You thought wrong,” I toss back.

“And I’m sorry,” he continues. “*Your* allies?”

“I’m my father's number two. You’re merely an accessory. A handbag.”

Takeshi’s grin widens. “A *handbag*? You wound me, princess.”

“I’m sure I’ve told you a hundred times by now to stop calling me that.”

“What else should I call you, then? Beloved fiancée?” He drops his voice. “I think you like it more than you admit.”

At that moment dinner is announced, cutting our conversation short. I throw Takeshi one last glare before stalking toward the table.

Dinner begins, the atmosphere tense, and eventually the centerpiece of the evening—*fugu*, AKA pufferfish sashimi—is presented with great fanfare.

While delicious, pufferfish is *extremely* dangerous due to the high levels of tetrodotoxin in their organs and skin—enough in one fish to kill thirty people. The chefs that prepare and serve it train for years to be surgeons with their knives, making sure to only serve the edible parts, and not anything that’s going to kill a whole dinner party. Fun fact: as part of the final exam to get their license to serve it, they have to eat *fugu* they have prepared themselves.

No pressure.

The chef, a man well-known to our family, begins slicing, his movements precise. But halfway through, Takeshi rises from his seat beside me.

“What are you doing?” I sign, glaring at him. “Sit down!”

He smiles benignly as he walks around the table to Chef Sawada. “May I?” he murmurs in Japanese.

Chef Sawada frowns, his eyes darting to me. I glare at Takeshi. “Stop embarrassing yourself. Your bullshit in this case has the potential to kill people. Sit. Down.”

“Relax, princess,” he says smoothly. “I’ve done this before.”

He takes the knife from the chef, ignoring the man’s protests and beginning to slice the fish himself. The room watches in stunned, horrified silence as he works, his hands steady, his expression cool and unreadable. When he’s done, he slips a piece onto my plate and leans close to me, his voice a quiet murmur against my ear.

“You should know how good I am with a blade, fiancée.”

The challenge hangs in the air, thick and heavy. I hesitate, my pulse hammering as I look at the piece of fish, translucent and perfect and potentially deadly.

“Go ahead, princess,” he murmurs again. “Eat up.”

I know he wants me to cower. Wants me to say no, and look weak in front of my allies, afraid of my own fiancé.

I won’t show weakness. I *can’t.*

So I take my chopsticks, lift the piece of fish from my plate, and slide it into my mouth. It melts on my tongue, delicate and cold.

Takeshi looks pleased with himself as I defiantly look straight at him as I chew and swallow. The tension melts from the rest of the room, audible exhales coming from all over as I turn to smile at everyone.

“My compliments to the chef,” I sign with a large grin, letting Nina translate for the crowd and enjoying the laughter and applause that follows.

Nina eyes me nervously, but I wink back at her as I finish my pufferfish.

Suddenly, a faint numbness begins to spread across my tongue. My lips.

Holy fuck.

My eyes widen, my body stiffening as my breath catches. My gaze rips to Takeshi as he calmly takes his seat next to me again, watching me, his expression unreadable.

“How’s the fish, *dear*,” he growls quietly.

My throat works, panic beginning to roar in my veins like wildfire as he leans close.

“It’s just a tiny bit,” he murmurs into my ear. “Just enough to remind you…”

“Remind me of *what*!?” I sign frantically, trying to slow my racing pulse.

Takeshi’s gaze doesn’t leave mine as he plucks a piece of fish off his own plate and pops it into his mouth.

“Of *whose you are now*,” he murmurs.

After I gulp down the rest of my wine and drain the water glass in front of me, I feel the numbness begin to fade. But the weight of what just happened doesn’t, not at all.

This man is a fucking lunatic.

I have no idea if what just happened was a fucked-up game, a power-play, or just that Takeshi is legitimately crazy enough to poison me in front of both our families.

I thought I could handle him.

Now I’m not sure I'll even *survive* him.

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11

KATARINA

THE NEXT MORNING, the taste of last night still lingers on my tongue.

Not the fish, thankfully—that delicate sliver of danger carved by Takeshi's precise hands is gone, though my mouth was still tingly off and on when I was going to sleep. But the bitter taste of his next level power-play is still there.

You should know how good I am with a blade, fiancée.

I mean, fucking seriously? The man literally poisoned me at our engagement dinner, deliberately, in full view of everyone.

I pull the silk robe tighter around me as I pace my bedroom, my lips pursed and my thoughts still black. With a heavy sigh, I finally plop down on my bed and then flop back across it.

Furrcules curls against my hip as he shifts to snuggle a little closer. He's snoring faintly, blissfully unaware of the turmoil storming within me.

Slowly, his warmth against me melts some of the fury away. With a wry smile, I turn to look at him, stroking the stripes behind his ears as he purrs contentedly.

I'd give anything to feel that kind of peace right now.

Nina knocks lightly before letting herself in, dressed casually in jeans and a hoodie. "I brought coffee," she announces, holding up two steaming mugs. "How's it going? You look like you've been stewing all night."

“What gave it away?” I sign glumly, scowling as I stand and take the mug. The caffeine is necessary right now. Someone to vent to who won’t sugarcoat things might be even more so.

Nina takes my former spot on the bed next to Furrcules’ slumbering bulk, sipping her coffee as she watches me start to pace again. “This is about the fish, isn’t it?”

“The asshole could have killed me!” I sign furiously.

Nina raises a brow, calm as ever. “Okay, is there a *chance* it was an accident?”

I stop and shoot her a look. She makes a face.

“Fuck, Kat…” She shakes her head, her brow furrowed. “Does Ryu know?”

I only briefly mentioned the fish thing to Nina last night. I *thought* about telling Ryu—maybe even fantasized about his reaction to finding out Takeshi fucking poisoned me.

But *then* I thought about the utter shitshow that would ensue if Papa’s top advisor cut Takeshi’s head off at our engagement dinner. I ended up stewing on it instead.

I smile wryly. “I don’t mean to take this out on you.” I take a sip of my coffee and sigh. “Bet you’re glad you landed in *this* particularly dysfunctional family.”

She rolls her eyes. “Right, because my life before the Ishida household was definitely all sunshine and roses,” she mutters.

“Anyone ever get poisoned at your family's dinner parties?”

“Probably,” she snickers before she sighs and shakes her head. “Okay, so, that's a no to telling Ryu.”

“Can you even imagine?”

She grins. “No. But I’m guessing you have, in great detail.”

I run my fingers through my hair as I curl up in the chair, sipping the coffee.

“Hey, you okay?”

I nod. “Yeah,” I sign. “It was just…I mean, sitting there, trying to decide if he was playing a game or if I was about to die…” I shake my head. “He’s fucking crazy, Nina.”

She nods. “Definitely. But I think he's mainly trying to get under your skin. And, given that you’re practically vibrating with fury, I’d say he succeeded.”

I grit my teeth. “I hate it. He’s been on my mind all night.”

Nina smirks as I realize what I just said.

“Not like that,” I sign quickly.

“Not in the *slightest*? Really?” She grins and wags her brows as she runs her fingers through Furrcules’ soft fur. “I mean, yeah, the man's a psycho. But…I mean…”

When she trails off, I fix her with a hard look. “No, please,” I sign, my lips tight. “Don’t stop there.”

Nina rolls her eyes. “He’s *hot*, okay?”

I make a face, and she laughs.

“Oh, fuck you. Don’t make me the weird one for pointing out the obvious. Your fiancé is a lunatic, sure. But that is one *fine* looking man.”

“Hard disagree.”

“He’s *hot*, Kat,” she fires back with a snort. "Plus, that whole crazy thing amps it up a little more. Don’t even try to tell me I’m wrong.”

“I don’t have to try. You’re wrong. He’s not attractive.”

“He is.”

I roll my eyes. “Then *you* marry him!”

She laughs. “Well, I appreciate your blessing. But I’m not the one he’s *clearly* got his sights set on.”

“*Lucky me*.”

* * *

IT’S times like this that remind me how fortunate I am to have Nina. None of her teasing was serious earlier today. But I know her well enough to know that her goal this morning wasn’t about convincing me of Takeshi’s physical attractiveness.

I mean, okay, yes, off the record, the man is *gorgeous*…though call me old-fashioned, but attraction has a way of dipping when someone feeds you nerve toxin.

No, her goal earlier was to get my head back in the game and get me energized and focused. And it worked. So now that I’m thinking more clearly, not just stewing in my room about what a hot psycho jerk Takeshi is, I’m focused on the realities of my life right now.

Papa is awake and alert, but the hospital is keeping him in one more day to run some tests. I’m glad that they’re taking such good care of him, but the problem is the longer he stays there, not making any sort of appearances, the more people are going to start…questioning things.

And now, with Takeshi out there blatantly trying to cozy up to my allies, playing on the patriarchal tendencies of some of the older Yakuza leaders to portray himself as “their guy”?

Yeah, I need to shore up my own alliances. Fast.

It’s nearly noon by the time I find Ryu. He’s in Papa’s office, barking orders to two *fuku-honbucho*—street-level leaders who report to *waka gashira* lieutenants.

When he spots me, he gruffly dismisses them, leaving us alone.

I don’t waste any time.

“I need to know who’s loyal,” I sign, my movements crisp and deliberate. “And who’s been talking to Takeshi.”

Ryu’s expression hardens. “You think he’s making a move, beyond antagonizing Yamamoto last night?”

“Wouldn't you be, if you were him?”

Ryu swears under his breath and drags a hand through his hair. “I don’t like the bastard. He’s too smug, too sure of himself. He walked into this house like he owned it, and half these fools are already looking at him like he’s their savior.”

“I agree,” I nod. “That’s why we need to act now. This empire is yours and mine to run while Papa isn’t able to—”

“*Yours* to run,” Ryu interrupts gently. “My duty is to support you in any way I can, as I always have your father.”

I smile at him. “You’re so good to this family, Ryu.”

He smiles. “This family *is* my family. I owe your father everything, including my life. I will protect this empire with everything I have and am.”

“Same,” I sign. “Which is why I’m not about to let Takeshi Mori slide in and take what isn't his.”

Ryu's sharp eyes search mine for a long moment. Finally, he nods. “What do you need me to do?”

I exhale slowly. “Keep your ear to the ground. Talk to the captains you trust. Let them know that my father’s wishes haven’t changed—the Ishida-kai answers to me.”

“And Takeshi?” Ryu growls, a hint of eagerness in his voice.

“Leave him to me,” I sign, a dangerous smile on my lips.

* * *

THE REST of the afternoon is spent in quiet meetings and subtle maneuvering. I move through the estate like a shadow, pulling aside or calling in the *waka gashira* that I know personally and know I can rely on.

With Nina translating when necessary, I remind them of their oaths to my father. I assure them that *nothing* has changed, and that I'm prepared to lead in his absence.

"Kolya-sama left you in charge," a captain named Johnny Iwao murmurs, his expression uncertain, his eyes darting to Nina. "But Takeshi—"

"Is an outsider," I sign sharply. "He doesn't understand our ways. He doesn't understand this family."

"Yet he's to be your husband…?"

"Which does not mean my equal, nor does it automatically grant him power. Is that understood?"

The man nods slowly. "Perfectly. I trust you, Katarina-sama, same as I do your father."

Good. That's one more.

By evening, I'm exhausted. My feet ache, my head pounds, and all I want is a moment to myself. I retreat to the gardens, where the lanterns are starting to flicker to life. Furrcules walks beside me, occasionally swatting at leaves, his tiny growls breaking the quiet.

I sink onto a stone bench, leaning my head back and letting the cool night air wash over me.

This is what I'm fighting for. My father's legacy. My place as the head of this family. I won't let Takeshi or anyone else take it from me.

A rustle of footsteps breaks the silence, and I spot a dark figure emerging from the shadows and moving toward me.

Takeshi.

Of fucking course.

Furrcules growls and bares his teeth, stopping my fiancé a few feet away. Takeshi's eyes swivel to the tiger cub at my feet before drifting back to me.

"Has he been fed recently?"

“Why don’t you come a little closer and ask him yourself?” I sign, a docile smile on my face.

“Once we’re married,” he murmurs, “I hope you realize that little death machine is out. I’m *not* sharing a roof with him, much less a bed.”

“Shockingly,” I motion to him, “we’re on the same page there. You won’t, in fact, be sharing a roof with Furrcules, much less a bed. Because *he’ll* be in my bed, and *you* will be outside. Or in a ditch. Or…I don’t really care where.”

Takeshi chuckles quietly. “You put so much effort into this.”

“Into what.”

“Pretending you don’t daydream about my hands on you, and my fingers *in you*, and my cock pounding your tight little pussy after chasing you down and pinning you to the ground, *every single time* you look at me.”

My face goes crimson and I try to come up with a retort. But before I can think of anything, he just smiles at me.

“I hear you’ve been a busy bee today,” he murmurs. “Rounding up allies, whispering in corners. That’s cute, princess, but unnecessary. You’re fighting a war that doesn’t need to happen.”

“It does if it keeps you from taking what isn’t yours,” I sign back.

His expression doesn’t waver, but a flash of something sharp and dangerous flickers in his dark eyes. “You think you can stop me?”

“Are you admitting that you’re trying to do what I’m accusing you of?”

Takeshi stares at me for a long beat, his gaze unwavering. Then, to my surprise, he smiles. Not his usual smug grin, but smaller, like he’s genuinely amused.

“You’re bold,” he murmurs, almost to himself. “I’ll give you that.”

“And you’re arrogant,” I sign, standing to face him and stepping closer until we’re nearly eye to eye. “But not as clever as you think. If you were, you’d know better than to underestimate me.”

For a moment, neither of us moves. The air is thick with tension, the space between us shrinking to nothing. Then Takeshi leans in, his voice a low whisper.

“We’ll see about that, *princess*.”

I don’t flinch. I don’t blink. I hold his gaze until he finally turns and walks away, disappearing into the shadows.

Furrcules growls softly behind me, sensing my unease. I turn and reach down to scratch behind his ears, exhaling slowly.

“We’ll see, indeed,” I whisper, the words barely audible. Takeshi Mori may think he’s winning, but he doesn’t know me.

Not yet.

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12

TAKESHI

THE ISHIDA-KAI ARE WATCHING ME, waiting, like jackals sizing up a lion. Testing, prodding for weakness.

They don’t realize I see it—the way they gather in corners, voices low, eyes flicking to me when they think I’m not looking. But I see everything.

It’s all obviously Katarina’s doing. She’s been busy, that fiancée of mine. Moving chess pieces, whispering into the ears of various Ishida-kai allies. It’s almost cute how hard she’s trying to freeze me out.

Almost.

But this is a game I’ve been playing much longer than she realizes.

The captains are huddled near the far side of the study when I enter, talking quietly. Kolya was back in action as of two days ago, but then earlier this morning his doctors called him back to the hospital for some more tests.

His health issues aren't common knowledge, of course. Only the extreme inner circle—i.e., the captains I’ve just walked in on—knows about their *Oyabun’s* medical condition.

It goes without saying that *I’m* not supposed to know, either. But what can I say: I’m good at reading people, and I’ve figured out what’s going on with Kolya.

Just kidding. I bugged half the rooms in the house the first time anyone was dumb enough to let me wander around unsupervised.

A tumor on the spine sounds…brutal. Perhaps it’s part of the reason Katarina is so on edge recently.

That, or she’s still trying to reconcile her burning hate for me with what I’m sure is a burning desire for me to follow through on the dark fantasies she voiced to "Kaiju".

She’s close with her father—unlike me. Mom had Kenzo, and then Hana and I years later, with the same man: Hideo Mori, who at the time was the fearsome head of the Mori-kai in Kyoto, where our Norwegian mother had been studying abroad.

Freaked at the prospect of raising a child in the world of the Yakuza, she fled Japan when she was pregnant with Kenzo, never even telling Hideo she was expecting. Years later she went back to Japan, hoping to re-ignite things with him. But once again, she decided that she couldn’t raise a family with a Yakuza kingpin as the patriarch.

She left Japan a second time, now pregnant with Hana and I, and never came back. Hideo ended up moving on, finding his own happy ever after, and changing his name to leave the world of the Yakuza behind.

He’s in New York now, living his best life as Hideo Yamaguchi. Our half-sister, Fumi, is there as well—a top hot-shot lawyer at a top hot-shot law firm, not to mention First Lady of the state, since her husband is Governor.

It’s a strange world.

Hana and Kenzo have bonded with Hideo at little, but I haven’t much. Nothing personal—it’s not like I fault him for not even knowing we existed until recently. We’re just…not close.

Akira and I were, though.

Mom had met him through the various aristocratic circles she floated through. I never knew much about his background, except that he came from a prominent political family in Japan, had money, and was probably the coolest motherfucker I’d ever met.

I was getting into some dumb shit with the wrong kind of people, who knows why. Maybe it was a lack of male role models. Or lack of direction.

Perhaps it was what a shrink would later call my “psychologically atypical personality traits” beginning to manifest.

Anyway, that’s when mom had Akira over to our place for dinner.

At first, I thought it was bullshit and maybe a little racist that she’d found the one Japanese guy living anywhere remotely close to us in the English countryside to play buddy-buddy with me. But by the end of it, when Akira took me outside and showed me his old BSA Y13 motorcycle?

Fuck me. I was in.

After that, especially as mom got sicker, and Hana developed her own circle of friends, Akira became like the cool uncle I'd never had. To me, he was like an Asian Patrick Swayze: effortlessly cool, smug, and fun. Over the next few years, he taught me everything that made me who I am today.

Bikes and cars. Engines. Music. Girls. He taught me how to lift, how to channel all the rage I felt inside into constructive activities like building my first street-racing motorcycle from the ground up, working out, getting my first girlfriend.

And then one day, Akira said he had to go back to Japan to deal with some family stuff.

He never came back.

Never called, wrote, emailed. *Nothing*. It was like the guy had vanished off the face of the Earth.

Years later, after I’d followed Kenzo and Mal to Kyoto, I started digging into it. That’s when I learned the truth. Akira didn’t just magically disappear.

He was killed.

I’ve been trying to retrace his path and figure out where the trail ends ever since, so I can find whoever did it and make them and their immediate descendants wish to God that they’d never been born.

And as of a few months ago, I finally figured out where that trail leads:

…To Kolya fucking Ishida’s front door.

I think that at least partially explains why I wanted to slither my way into the Ishida-kai, via Katarina. Yes, my primary duty is to the Mori-kai. And yes, marrying Katarina ends the potential violence between our families, and allows Kenzo to officially set up shop in Tokyo without setting off World War Three.

But there’s more to it than that.

By the time I’m done here, not only *will* I figure out what happened to Akira—and when I do, someone will pay dearly, even if that person is my soon-to-be father-in-law—but I’ll also control the Ishida-kai from the inside out, like a puppet-master.

Both the empire, *and* the princess…

Across the room, Yamamoto's heavy brows are knit as he grumbles something to the others. He’s been in Kolya’s circle for as long as anyone can remember, which makes him one of the most influential voices in the room.

Influence I need.

“I didn’t know we were having a meeting,” I say casually, striding into the room. I don’t have to raise my voice; the captains hear me anyway. Their heads swivel in unison, and the room goes quiet.

“It’s nothing you need concern yourself with,” Yamamoto says, his voice a low rumble.

I smile faintly, slipping my hands into my pockets. “Really? Last I checked, I was engaged to Katarina Ishida. That makes me family. Family is concerned with everything.”

“Family *earns its place*,” Baku Katagiri, another Ishida-kai ally, shoots back. His tone is sharp. “You haven’t done that yet.”

I let the insult roll off me as I step closer.

“I will earn my place soon enough,” I say, evenly, unbothered. “Whether you approve or not.”

“You think marrying Katarina-sama makes you untouchable?” Ryu’s voice is like a blade. I turn slowly to see him standing near the door, arms crossed, mouth set in that insufferable, perpetual scowl of his.

Here we go.

“Untouchable?” I repeat, letting the word hang in the air. “I don’t think it makes me untouchable. I think it makes me *necessary*.”

He snorts softly, his gaze dark. “You’re delusional if you think we need you. You’re a guest in this house—that's all.”

“Guest?” I echo, my lips curling dangerously. “The moment I marry Katarina, I’m no longer a guest. I’m part of this family. Privy to everything.”

“That,” Ryu says, “is Katarina’s choice to make.”

I smile wryly, my gaze locking with his. *They think this is a fight they can win.* That Katarina can outmaneuver me, keep me in the dark while she runs her little show behind closed doors. It’s admirable how loyal they are to her. But loyalty doesn’t change reality.

I keep smiling as I calmly step closer to Ryu.

“You’re very loyal to her, aren’t you.”

His face remains impassive as he stays silent, glaring at me. My smile widens.

“I’ve seen how you are around her,” I continue. “So protective. So attentive… It must goad you to no end to see me waltz in here and *pluck* what you’ve watched from a distance and waited for so patiently.”

Ryu’s eyes narrow. “What you’re insinuating is both disgusting and offensive, *gaijin*.”

Slowly, I lean closer to his ear, delicately coughing. “I’ll have to tell you all about the wedding night later, so you can see if what I get to taste is everything you’ve always imagined…”

The room goes utterly still. I brace myself, waiting for Ryu to explode.

He doesn’t even blink. He doesn’t draw his katana, or hit me, or say a word. But finally he clears his throat and leans into me.

“If you think you’re the first little maggot to try and get under my skin, you are sorely mistaken, *gaijin*. Unlike you, I’m not at the mercy of my emotions like a child. I don’t take orders from anyone except Katarina—a woman, I might add, who I consider my own blood.”

I sigh. “Ryu—”

“No, *gaijin*. You aren’t going to provoke me, no matter how disgusting you are. But if *she* asks it of me?” His smile widens. “I will not hesitate for a second to separate your foul-mouthed head from your body.”

For a moment, I say nothing. I just smile, slowly and deliberately, letting him feel every inch of the threat I’m not voicing. Then I turn away, reclaiming my glass and strolling back through the study past the cluster of captains and out into the hall. Let Ryu stew. I’ll deal with him in my own time.

For now, I have something *much* more…interesting to deal with.

* * *

I FIND Katarina in her wing of the house, as I knew I would.

Now, I can’t claim to have known I’d find her drying off her naked body after a shower, but here we are.

There's still a faint sound of running water when I let myself into her bedroom. The door clicks shut softly behind me and I lean against it, watching her through the open bathroom door and the steam-fogged glass shower walls.

She doesn’t notice me at first, too preoccupied with turning the water off and then wrapping herself in a towel. I take the opportunity to poke my head into the small office in the adjoining room, frowning when I see that fucking tiger cub asleep on the sofa.

I close the door to the office and its clawed occupant and turn to lean against it as I watch Katarina.

She catches sight of me a second later as she steps out of the shower and freezes, her entire body going rigid as her wide, gray eyes snap to mine.

“What the *fuck* are you doing in here?!” she signs, her movements furious as she violently yanks the towel around herself.

I smile, calmly walking toward the bathroom. “Looking for you, wife.”

Her face flushes with fury—and something else I know she doesn’t want me to see. “Get out.”

I take a slow step forward, my eyes dragging deliberately over her—the damp strands of hair clinging to her neck, the curve of her bare shoulders, the way her chest rises and falls unevenly. She scrambles back a step, clutching the towel tighter. The movement only makes me smile wider.

“What are these games you’re playing?” I ask softly, tilting my head. “You can't think I haven’t noticed.”

“Excuse me?”

“Is it really purely by chance that the *waka gashira* and other allies all go silent when I walk into a room?”

“Not chance,” she signs. “It’s probably your repellent personality. Or, I don't know, the fact that you’re their enemy.”

“*Was*,” I growl. “*Was* their enemy. Now I’m their boss.”

She rolls her eyes.

“Roll them all you like, princess,” I purr. “When we’re married, what’s yours is mine, including control over those sulking, pouting captains. So, no more games. Although I promise they’re doing nothing but amuse me.”

“They’re not games,” she signs, glaring at me. “They’re protection.”

“Protection?” I echo, amusement threading through my voice. “From?”

“*You*,” she signs fiercely. “You think you’re in control here, but you’re not.”

“Control?” I move before she can react, grabbing her by the wrist and pulling her close. I feel her pulse flutter beneath my fingers, quick and erratic.

“I’ve been using the carrot, Katarina,” I murmur, my voice low as I look down at her. “But I could always switch to the stick. What do you think your captains would say if I told them how much you love being chased?” I whisper. “How much you love being roughly *used?*”

Her hand flies up, fingers spelling out the word before I can finish my sentence.

“Asshole. I’d simply tell them how *small* your dick is,” she signs furiously.

The laugh that escapes me is genuine, dark and sharp.

“We don’t need to wait for the wedding night, princess,” I growl. “I could fuck your tight little cunt right now. Then we'll see if the word *small* is still in your lexicon.”

Something wicked ripples in her eyes. Her cheeks heat, her throat bobs up and down as her lower lip trembles.

Darkness flexes inside me, hunger beginning to gnaw at my mind as I slowly push her back until her ass is against the vanity, boxing her in as my hands go to the counter on either side of her.

I smirk, my eyes dragging over her again. “Tell me, princess,” I purr, my voice dropping to a growl, “will it be a *white* wedding? Will we be staining the sheets with virgin blood when we consummate our marriage?”

Her face flushes crimson, and for a moment, her hands are stunned into silence. “That is *none* of your business,” she eventually signs furiously. “And we are not consummating anything.”

“Of course we are,” I counter. “It’s expected.”

“How romantic.” She rolls her eyes.

“I'd be lying if I promised you romance,” I say bluntly. “But I *can* promise you’ll be orgasming all over my face, fingers, and cock.”

The blush on her cheeks deepens.

“I think I’m right,” I growl quietly. “I think for all your kinkiness, looking online for a stranger to chase you, catch you and fuck you while you struggle, you’ve never actually *been* fucked before, have you?”

Her eyes widen as her mouth falls open in shock. She raises a hand to say something. But before her fingers can move, I’ve captured them in mine, silencing her.

“The way you always put up a fight…” I murmur, pressing her back against the cool marble of the vanity. Her breath hitches as I push my body to hers. “It's beginning to make me assume that you *like it*. You like the fight, princess, and I think you *love it* when I make you lose that fight. You *want me* to overpower you. Don't you.”

Her breath catches sharply as I whirl her around to face the mirror. I grab the front of her towel and yank it out of her grip, ripping it away and letting it fall to the floor.

Katarina squirms and fights, trying to wriggle out of my grasp as I pin her to the vanity.

She’s not going *anywhere*.

“I wonder if you even know what you look like when you lose,” I murmur.

Her lips part in protest, but then my hand slides around to roughly cup her breast, my fingers pinching her nipple and rolling it tightly, and her body tenses against me.

Her eyes roll back as a flush creeps over her cheeks and a sound close to a moan rumbles way in the back of her delicate throat.

She instantly tries to cover it up, but there’s no hiding it from me. I grin darkly and pinch the nipple again, rolling the little nub between the pads of my fingers, causing her to jerk against me again.

My other hand slides over her hip, moving to the front of her body. Her eyes widen in the mirror, her body shaking slightly as I keep her pinned

there, my hand snaking down her stomach. My fingers run over smooth skin. Then soft, trimmed, coppery-blonde hair.

Katarina's body jolts, and a sound that turns my dick to forged steel catches low in her throat as my fingers slide lower, finding molten, wet heat.

"*This*, princess" I murmur into her ear, "is what you look like when you're mine."

I plunge two fingers into her dripping wet pussy. Katarina arches against me as I pin her hard against the counter. My fingers curl deep, stroking against her g-spot, making her legs shake.

My mouth drags down her delicate neck, and when my teeth clamp down sharply and my fingers plunge deep into her, an enormous shudder rips down her spine.

I growl as I grind against her, the beast roaring inside me. My fingers mercilessly twist and torment her nipples, my teeth raking down her skin. I can feel her pussy clamping down around me, dripping all over my hand as I grind my palm against her clit. My fingers curl deeper, stroking against her g-spot over and over.

She falls forward, her eyes wild and her face slack as one hand braces herself against the mirror. The other drops to my own hand—whether to push it away or urge me on I don't know, but either way, I don't slow or stop what I'm doing. She clings to my wrist, nails digging into the back of my hand as I finger her harder and faster, feeling her body tremble against mine as her mouth opens in a silent scream.

Suddenly, her pussy ripples and clamps down tight on my fingers, her eyes rolling back and her body going completely rigid. Wetness floods my hand, and I feel her feet kicking against the tiled floor as she comes all over my fingers.

I keep her pinned where she is as I slowly slide my fingers from her quivering cunt. I drag them wetly up her body, rubbing them over her tender, swollen nipples and then bringing my hand up her throat until my fingertips drag across her lips.

"*Open*," I growl quietly.

She does.

Our eyes lock in the mirror as her lips part and I slide my wet fingers inside. Her eyes fly wide as I roll one of her nipples again, her tongue dancing over my fingers as she licks and sucks them clean, lost in the moment.

I lean into her ear, and she jolts when I bite down hard on the lobe.

"*Good girl*."

It's either the name, or the bite. But something shakes her from that floaty, post-orgasm bliss. Instantly, her face changes, her eyes narrowing on me. She pushes me back, and this time, I allow her to squirm free. She snatches the towel off the floor, her face burning as she turns away and hastily wraps it around herself.

She whirls on me, her eyes blazing, her lower lip trembling as she holds the towel against her still-shaking body.

"Get the fuck out," she signs hurriedly.

"Your pillow talk needs some work, princess."

Her lips purse.

"I never said you could touch me like that."

I snort. "You never said I *couldn't*."

"No, because you didn't let me."

I roll my eyes. "*Or* maybe you were just too busy coming all over my fingers like a greedy little slut to even remember how much you hate me."

Her throat works. Her bottom lip sucks between her teeth. Her hands move sharply, her gray eyes flinty.

"Get out. Get out and go to hell."

I grin. "I'll save you a seat, princess."

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13

KATARINA

THE MORNING of my wedding is almost unnervingly quiet. The house feels different—no captains coming and going, no tense undercurrent of secrets.

Today, it feels as if the Ishida estate itself knows something is about to change.

I sit before the vanity in my room, Furrcules chasing dust particles in the sunlight coming in through the windows while I let Nina fuss with my hair. She's good at braiding, pinning, smoothing. I'm not. My hands are too impatient. Nina, though, seems to find comfort in it.

"You're quiet," she says, glancing at me in the mirror.

I roll my eyes. She snickers. It's one of our favorite dumb jokes.

But she's…not wrong. I *am* quiet right now—at least pensive. I glance away, my cheeks warming.

He's been in my head. Not because today's the day I'm fucking marrying the psycho, the one who keeps barging into my world and past every boundary I have. Not because of what happened two days ago in the bathroom, either: if we're being honest, the fixation on my part started *much* longer ago than that.

It's maddening. And yet, there's something about him…

The way he looks at me, constantly calculating, always two moves ahead. Like he's trying to figure out—and easily succeeding—how to unravel me.

Bind me to him.

Control me.

The scary part is, I'm not sure I hate it *quite* as much as I should.

There are two prongs to Takeshi's attack on me. The first is going after my power within this family. On that, I'm not fucking budging. This is *my* empire, and no one—no man, not even a husband—will take that from me or try to control it *through* me.

But there's a second part to Takeshi's assault: the attack on *me* and my control over…well, myself. And on that front, I'm losing badly.

Maybe the aim of that is to control the organization better, but it feels more personal than that. More targeted.

More intimate.

"He's getting to you," Nina says, her tone light but knowing.

I flush for a second, trying to shake my thoughts away, as if merely thinking them has displayed them on my face.

"That's what he does, Kat," she continues. "Men like him love to burrow under your skin, make you question yourself."

"I'm not questioning myself," I sign sharply. "I'm questioning his motives. He wants control. Over me, over the Ishida-kai. I won't let him have it."

She frowns. "You think the marriage is a Trojan horse to gain control of our family?"

I lift a shoulder. "You don't?"

Nina's gaze meets mine in the mirror in front of us. "It's crossed my mind. But I'm sure it's crossed your dad's mind too. He wouldn't let this marriage happen if he thought Takeshi's whole goal was to turn you into a puppet and rule through you."

There's a knock at the door before it opens and Papa steps inside.

"Nina, would you give us a moment?"

Nina nods, bowing slightly and giving me a small, reassuring smile before leaving the room. My father closes the door and turns to me, his sharp eyes taking me in as though memorizing every detail.

“You look beautiful,” he says, his voice like gravel.

“Thank you,” I sign, my throat constricting slightly.

He steps closer. He’s still pale from his hospital stint, but the strength in his presence hasn’t waned. His shoulders are still broad and proud, and he looks every inch the powerful, feared *Oyabun* that he is in his dark, three-piece fitted suit with the traditional kimono draped over it. Furrcules makes a throaty meowling sound as he pads over to rub his face against Papa’s knee, purring contentedly as my father reaches down to rub behind the tiger’s ears.

My father glances up at me with a smirk. “Has Takeshi had the pleasure of meeting our Furrcules yet?”

“Yes, and he almost pissed himself.”

Papa chuckles, scratching at the top of Furrcules’ head before he rights himself and walks over to where I’m sitting. He places a hand on my shoulder, squeezing gently.

“Thank you, *Koshka*,” he says. “I’ve asked a lot of you these last few weeks, and you’ve taken it all in stride. I’m proud of you.”

The words hit me hard. My chest tightens and I blink quickly, refusing to let any tears fall. Instead, I just lift my hands and sign slowly. “I learned from the best.”

Papa’s lips twitch with a rare smile, and he nods. “Flattery will get you everywhere.” Then he sighs.

“What’s wrong?”

He smiles wryly. “I… I was thinking of your uncle this morning.”

My lips lift a little at the corners. It’s been a *long* time since I saw Papa’s brother, my uncle Jin. It’s been a long time since *anyone* has.

Uncle Jin is what in Japan we call *hikikomori*—essentially a shut-in or hermit. Usually men, they're people who one day just decide that the world is too much for them, and decide never to go out again.

In my uncle's case, there's also some mental health issues going on. Before he shut himself away in the apartment that Papa bought him, Jin was in and out of a couple of different hospitals, trying to manage his psychosis and paranoia. But eventually, what seemed to bring him the most peace was just tuning out the rest of the world.

Papa takes care of him, of course. He gets meals, supplies, and anything else he needs delivered daily. Every so often, he sends out notes out from the apartment: sometimes to Papa, sometimes to me. They're not always so lucid. But once in a while I'll get a random one that says something kind and simple like "Thinking of you. Love you." It's always a good feeling.

"I know this wedding is what it is," Papa sighs. "But even so, it would be nice to have the last of your blood relatives here today." He smirks. "He'd have a thing or two to say about the groom, I can guarantee that."

I grin briefly. Then my lips twist. "Can I ask you something?"

"Anything," he nods.

"Do you think Takeshi is a Trojan horse?"

Papa smirks just a little bit. "Yes. Of course he is. But do you know what you are?"

"Bait?" I sign testily.

He smiles and shakes his head. "No. You're the one nailing the trap door of the Trojan horse shut and threatening to light it on fire. And don't forget, daughter," Papa continues, "that the street runs both ways. For both us and the Mori-kai, this arrangement between our families stops any bloodshed. It also gives *you* the power to lead this empire without question."

"But I don't need to lead. You're here."

He smiles wryly. "For now."

"Papa—"

“It’s important to plan for all future outcomes, *Koshka*.” He steps over to me, smiles, and takes my hands in his. “You’re ready for this. Don’t let anyone—not even Takeshi—make you doubt that.”

“I won’t.”

My father isn’t a very touchy-feely kind of guy. So when he does hug me, like right now, I hold him tight, hanging onto the moment, hugging him back before we finally break apart.

“I’m proud of you,” he says softly.

When he’s gone, I sit in silence for a moment, letting his words settle over me. Then, with a sigh, I turn back to the vanity and reach for my makeup kit. When I open it, something catches my eye—a white envelope with gold trim, tucked neatly amongst the brushes and powders, just like the one on my plate at the engagement party.

I pull it out, my fingers trembling slightly.

Inside, in heavy black ink, two words:

Still mine.

My heart skips a beat, and my mind races. Takeshi? It *has* to be. But it feels weirder than his usual brand of control and mind games. There’s a skin-crawling creepiness to it I haven’t really seen from him before.

I shove the note back into the envelope and bury it beneath the other items in the kit, forcing myself to focus. I have other things to worry about right now.

* * *

THE CEREMONY in the back yard of the Ishida house is a blend of Western and Shinto traditions. The guests sit quietly as the *San-san-kudo* ceremony begins, the air thick with the scent of incense and heavy with the weight of expectation.

For all his disdain for the Yakuza, despite *being* the Yakuza, it was actually Papa who suggested—make that *insisted on*—adding the San-san-kudo to the wedding. The traditional “three cups” ceremony involves the bride and groom each taking three sips from three different sized cups of sake.

I stand across the small altar table from Takeshi, my hands steady despite the storm raging inside. The lacquered cups gleam in the soft light as the sake is poured from the teapot, the smallest cup placed before Takeshi first. He lifts it with a grace I wouldn’t have expected. Then I watch as he takes three slow, measured sips before setting it down. His movements are calm and controlled, as if this is just another day for him.

Then it’s my turn. I lift the cup and take three sips. The look in Takeshi’s eyes as he watches me makes it impossible to relax.

The medium cup comes next. I go first this time, then pass it to him. His gaze lingers on me as he drinks, the tension between us palpable. The final cup—the largest—is placed before him, and I hold my breath as he lifts it.

Three sips. Slow. Intentional.

I can barely hide the small, satisfied smile while I pretend to sip from the cup when it’s my turn.

I don’t *actually* drink from that last cup, though. It’s not a dumb little show of rebellion against the wedding. It’s because I snuck downstairs earlier and…*tampered* with the largest cup.

The one he just sipped from.

I didn’t do it out of malice. I did it as a warning, just like he did before to try and get *me* “under control.”

It was the note that pushed me from merely fantasizing about it to sneaking down here and actually doing it.

Still mine.

It just *grated* on me.

For a second, as I watch him, I remember the numbness and that sense of fear that tingled through me after he fed me the pufferfish—the piece he’d

cut himself and purposefully left a tiny bit of skin on, so that I'd feel the effects of the toxin.

The priest pronounces us man and wife. I just stand there, holding back my smug smirk, wondering if Takeshi's tongue is going numb yet from the pufferfish venom I laced the last cup with.

But then suddenly—he moves.

Before I can react, Takeshi grabs me, his hand firm around my wrist as he pulls me close. His other hand tangles possessively in the back of my hair, grabbing it in a fist as he yanks me to him.

His mouth crashes against mine, hard and unyielding. I'm too stunned to resist, my thoughts spinning as his hand winds through my hair.

And then I taste it.

Sake.

My eyes widen in horror as I realize he's pushed the poisoned sake into my mouth, forcing me to swallow it before I can pull away. When he finally releases me, I'm gasping for breath, my heart pounding in my chest.

Takeshi's eyes lock on mine as he leans close, pressing his forehead to mine. *"I hope you know your doses, princess,"* he growls quietly, his voice dangerous.

Panic floods my veins as I feel the beginnings of a faint tingling on my tongue. Takeshi's grip on my wrist tightens briefly before he lets go, his expression almost amused as he watches me. Then, slowly, he begins to sway.

"Takeshi…" I try to sign, but my hands feel numb and leaden.

His knees buckle and he drops, the lacquered cup clattering to the ground beside him. The room erupts into a chaotic blur.

The last thing I see before everything goes black is Takeshi's face, his lips curled into the smallest hint of a savage, dark grin.

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14

KATARINA

THE VOICES ARE MUFFLED: distorted, distant, like I’m underwater. My body feels leaden, as though I’ve been bound in chains, but it runs deeper than that—like there’s something inside me that's keeping me in this melty, dark state.

I try to move my hand to signal that I’m awake, but nothing happens. My body refuses even the smallest twitch of a finger. Panic claws at the edges of my mind, threatening to swallow me whole.

“She’s awake,” a familiar voice says.

Papa. His voice carries its usual weight, but there’s an edge of relief in it. Or maybe anger.

“Katarina.” Nina’s voice, soft and steady. “Can you hear us?”

I want to scream *yes,* to let them know that I’m listening. But my eyelids only flutter weakly, and even that miniscule acknowledgment feels like a monumental effort.

“Good,” Papa says, his tone getting sharper. “The venom will wear off soon. Just rest.”

Venom. The word pierces through the haze, dragging the events of the ceremony back to the front of my mind. The San-san-kudo. The cups. Takeshi's kiss.

My pulse quickens as I piece it together, the memory of it all crashing over me like a wave.

“Those bastards are going to fucking bleed for this,” Papa snarls from close by in the darkness, his voice colder now. “Sergey Vorobev is a dead man.”

No.

They have it all wrong. But I can’t correct them, can’t tell them it was *me* who laced that last cup, wanting to give Takeshi a taste of his own medicine. And now…

Shit.

“Just say the word,” Ryu cuts in, “and I’ll have our full forces at that fucker’s front door. We'll burn his house to the ground.”

“Not yet,” Papa mutters. “I don’t want us to be seen as reactionary. They haven’t claimed responsibility, which means they wanted this done quietly.”

It wasn’t them, I scream inside my head. *Please don’t start a war because of me*.

“We’ll say for now that it was a tainted bottle of sake. Then wait and see if that bastard does or says anything.”

“Consider it done, Kolya-san,” Ryu grunts.

I hear retreating footsteps, and a door shutting. I blink my eyes again, and again. Finally, they flutter open.

“*There* you are,” Nina smiles as she leans down over me.

I’m in my room at Papa’s house. My lips unthaw just enough to smile a little up at my friend. Then Papa bends in from the other side, a soft smile on his lips.

“*Koshka*,” he murmurs quietly, his eyes darting over my face. He reaches up and pushes some of my hair out of my eyes. I want to reach out and squeeze his hand. But I still can’t move anything except my eyelids and my lips.

I glance down at myself as best I can, given that my neck still isn't working. I’m dressed in a cotton pajama set—the kind with a button-up top like a man's dress shirt. I wish I could smile, because I’m suddenly remembering the way I gravitated to these types of pajamas to snuggle up in when I was sick as a kid.

“Can you move your hands?” Nina asks.

I blink a few times.

“How about we try two times for no, three for yes.”

I blink twice.

“Is the chart still around?”

I groan inside.

“The chart”. I fucking hated that thing when I was child, before I’d learned to sign, right after the events that stole my voice. My right hand was broken anyway after the accident, so I couldn’t write either.

"The chart" is a grid of letters usually used with quadriplegics to facilitate communication. Someone points to a letter, and the nonverbal person nods or makes some other sign when they get to the right one. Rinse, repeat. Eventually, you have a sentence.

It takes for fucking ever. It was *hell* when I had to use it.

“I don’t think so,” Nina sighs. “Hang on, I’ll draw one.”

Goddammit.

Sure enough, she grabs a pen and paper and makes a grid of the twenty-six letters.

“Are you in pain?” Papa murmurs.

Nina points to the Y. I remain still. She points to the N, and I blink.

They both exhale.

“Thank God. Dr. Kim came right away,” Papa says. “You should be okay, but you were dosed with a decent amount of tetrodotoxin. It paralyzed your body, but it will wear off soon, probably by later tonight.”

I groan internally. Wonderful. I’m stuck motionless for the next few hours.

I grit my teeth, willing my muscles to react. All I manage is a slight nod of my head.

“Oh, great!” Nina says cheerfully when she spots the motion. “It’s wearing off already!”

I clench my jaw and manage to nod my head once more, just barely, in the direction of the letter chart.

“Hang on.”

Nina starts pointing at each letter one at a time. I nod when she gets to “T”. Then “A”. Then “K”.

Her brow furrows. “Takeshi?”

Clench-and-nod, slightly.

“You’re worried about him?”

I make as much of an “eh, maybe?” face as I can manage. Mostly, I’m curious if he’s dead or not, being that *I’m* the one who poisoned that sake.

“He’s fine,” Papa says quietly. “Still paralyzed, but I hear he’s talking, and able to sit up.”

Are you fucking *kidding me*? Of *course* he’s further along in his recovery. Of *course* my plan utterly backfires, leaving me still frozen in bed and him happily on his way to being up and dancing around.

Dick-fucking-head.

“He’s in the guest quarters on the other side of the gardens,” my father adds. “He’ll probably end up spending the night, until Dr. Kim gives him the all-clear tomorrow.” He sighs as he looks down at me, smiling as he pushes my hair back. “I’m so glad you’re okay, *Koshka*.”

“Same,” Nina adds softly. She holds up the grid. “Anything else?”

I nod. Then nod again when she gets to F. She smiles, not needing any other letters.

“Furrcules is staying in my room for now.”

I pout a little. Papa chuckles. “As much as he loves you, I won’t let you share a room with that tiger until you can move.” He frowns. “He could think you were incapacitated prey…”

As if! Furrcules would *never*. And yet…okay, if the big lug decided he wanted to snuggle my face, as he often does, I wouldn't be able to push him away from my mouth and nose.

“I’ll take care of him, promise,” Nina smiles. “You'll have him back tomorrow.”

“We’ll leave you to rest now,” Papa says. “But this isn’t over, not by a long shot. Don’t worry,” he growls. “Sergey is going to pay dearly for this.”

I follow them with my eyes as they retreat, the door clicking shut behind them. The silence that follows is thick, oppressive. The numbness in my body is a cage, holding me still while my mind races.

At some point, I fall asleep. When I wake up later, it’s dark. I try to sit up.

Nope, not there yet.

But I *can* move my head, and wiggle my fingers and toes, and even lift one of my arms. I turn my head to the side, glancing at the clock and seeing that it’s midnight.

The door creaks open.

For a second, I think it must be Furrcules, sneaking out of Nina’s room to come visit his favorite human. But then I hear it.

Feet.

Not paws.

Feet.

They approach, slow and deliberate.

“If you thought your little stunt would stop us from consummating our union…”

Takeshi’s voice is a low, dark growl.

“Then you’re sorely mistaken.”

My pulse explodes in my veins. I can’t move. I can barely turn my head to see him, but I *feel* him. His presence fills the room, closing in on me like a storm about to break.

My heart pounds as he steps closer. The mattress dips under his weight, and I feel the heat of his body before his chiseled, savagely gorgeous face appears over me. His fingers brush my cheek, his touch deceptively gentle.

“The things I could do to you right now…” he murmurs, his voice a velvet threat. “You can’t move. Can’t fight.” His lips curl viciously. “You’re completely at my mercy.”

A rush of fear and something darker floods my veins, tangled together, leaving me breathless. This is my nightmare.

It’s also my fantasy.

And he knows it.

His fingers trail down my neck, teasing the delicate skin before continuing lower. I’m hyper-aware of every place his touch lingers… Every place it doesn’t. The anticipation is maddening.

I whimper when his hand cups my breast through the pajama top. He squeezes, finding the pebbled nub of my nipple through the cotton, pinching it. A muffled moan lodges in my throat, and my eyes snap viciously to his.

Takeshi smiles.

“Oh, I *like* this,” he chuckles quietly. “My own compliant, docile little *toy* to play with.”

He twists my nipple again, making something raw and needy throb between my legs.

Without warning, Takeshi pops open the top button of my pajama shirt. My eyes widen even more as they snap back to his.

Is he fucking serious?!

“The way I see it, princess,” he murmurs, “since we’re married now, what’s yours, as they say, is *mine*.” His eyes glint as he pops another button, then slides his gaze to mine. “Oh, and yes, I asked. That little stunt might have knocked us both out. But technically speaking, we *did* complete the ceremony. Which means…”

We’re married.

For real.

Fuck.

Takeshi pops open a third button. Then a fourth. He keeps going, the pajama top slowly opening until he gets to the last button, and it falls wide completely. The moonlight glistens pale and white on my bare torso, my skin prickling to goosebumps and my nipples tightening to points under his gaze.

My pulse races, my breath coming short and fast as my stomach muscles clench and unclench.

Something wicked and dark spreads over me as Takeshi puts his hand on my bare breast, squeezing, pinching my nipple hard.

“You’re lucky I’m in an amiable mood,” he murmurs, his gaze hovering on my breasts before moving to my eyes. “I won’t fuck you tonight. Not like this.”

Relief floods me, but it’s short-lived.

“No, when I fuck you,” he continues, “I want you to *fight me*. I want your blood pumping, your muscles twitching. I want your skin slick with sweat, your body trembling with effort. And when I catch you, and you finally surrender…” His lips curve into a smile. “*That’s* when I’ll tear into that pretty, pink pussy and fuck you for the first time.”

The most fucked-up thing isn’t what he’s saying.

It’s that it’s *turning me on*.

A huge part of me wants this.

Craves it.

Gravitates to it, like a moth to a dark fucking flame.

“But that doesn’t mean we’ll be having a *completely* chaste wedding night…”

Takeshi’s hand slides down to the waist of my pajama bottoms. He deftly pulls at the tie, loosening it before his fingers slip under the elastic. He drags the bottoms down, shifting on the bed to slide his other hand underneath me. He grips my ass, arm muscles rippling under his t-shirt as he lifts my butt and slides the pajama bottoms down to my knees.

My pulse races. My breath comes in ragged jolts as mixture of horror, shame, and excitement explode within me.

Takeshi’s eyes drop to the front of the plain cotton panties I’m assuming Dr. Kim—maybe with Nina’s help—changed me into after I was knocked out.

“Not quite the sexy bridal lingerie I’d hoped for,” he murmurs, a dreamy, psychotic, musing tone in his voice.

“But I’m still interested to see what they’re hiding.”

He slips his fingers under the waistband and slowly tugs. The panties slide down my hips and thighs, peeling away from my sex until they tangle at my knees together with the pajama bottoms.

“Now what do have we here,” Takeshi growls quietly, his hand sliding up my bare thigh, leaving shivers in its wake. “A pretty little virgin pussy, and *all for me*.” He raises his head to look at me deviously. “A wedding present? Aww, you shouldn’t have…*wife*.”

His fingers push between my thighs, moving between my lips and parting them. Then he drags them back up, sliding through the sticky wetness he finds there before rolling them over my clit.

My body involuntarily jerks slightly.

Takeshi stands. For a second, I think he’s done with me, and that he’ll leave. Instead, he reaches down and peels off his t-shirt.

Fuck.

My eyes drag over the chiseled muscles of his grooved body—the smooth skin, the swirling loops of the *irezumi* tattoos. His thumbs hook into the waist of his sweatpants. Then, without any fanfare, he pushes them down and lets them fall to the floor.

I don’t see where they land. I don’t see anything at all except the *huge* cock that springs free of them.Holy fucking *fuck*.

My pulse thuds in my ears.

Takeshi’s cock is long, thick, and veined, with a slight curve that angles the swollen head upward.

My eyes bulge.

It's pierced, too, at the tip.

Sweet fucking God.

“Look as long as you like, princess,” he growls. “You’ll be becoming quite well acquainted with him.”

A million swears and curses run through my head, but my hand and arms are still immobilized at my sides.

Takeshi swaggers toward the bed, and then he reaches down and wraps a hand around his huge cock, stroking it.

“You made me swallow poison today,” he murmurs.

The mattress sinks lower as he puts his knee down next to me. Then he swings his leg over, straddling my chest, his bare thighs pressing against my breasts as he strokes his cock mere inches from my face. My breath catches.

“I think I’ll let you swallow something of mine in exchange. Now—open that pretty mouth, princess.”

I don't. For one, *fuck him*. And for two…well, I still *can’t*.

Takeshi arches a brow as he gazes down at me. “Oh my, is this an act of *defiance*? Or just that you still can’t move…”

He reaches down, picks up my wrist, and lifts my hand. When he lets go, it drops heavily to the bed.

He smiles widely.

“Oh, this is going to be *fun*. Allow me.”

I’m completely helpless as Takeshi slips two fingers between my lips, resting them on my tongue. He opens my mouth wider and wider until I can feel my jaw straining.

He fists his huge cock as he moves forward, angling the pierced, swollen head toward my open mouth.

“Happy wedding day, *wife*.”

Hot need throbs in my core as he pushes the swollen head of his cock past my lips and into my mouth. The sheer size of him keeps my jaw forced wide open, and he groans as he pushes a little deeper, letting the piercing drag over my tongue.

“*Fuck*, princess,” he growls tightly, his jaw clenching. “Your small mouth feels fucking incredible around my dick.”

Another raw sensation pulls at my core, blazing into fiery need.

I should hate this. I should hate *him*, for doing this to me.

I don’t.

And even though my limbs are still frozen, not *all* of me is. Because as Takeshi begin to grunt louder, thrusting his fat cock into my mouth again and again, using me like his own personal little toy, a slick, wet heat begins to pool between my thighs.

“Has your tongue unfrozen from the poison that *you* laced our wedding sake with, princess? Choke once on my cock for yes.”

I glare up at him, but my eyes aren't as full of rage as I'd like them to be.

He can tell.

A low smile curls his lips.

“And the Academy award goes to…*not you*,” he growls, smirking. “You might *desperately* hope that I think you’re hating this. But you're not. It’s right there in your eyes, princess. All over your face.”

He grunts, ramming his cock into the back of my throat as a low whimper chokes off deep in my chest and my thighs squeeze together as much as they can, aching for the friction against my swollen clit.

“You *enjoy* giving up control. You get all drippy and messy for me, choking on my fat cock, don’t you?”

I shiver when I feel one of his hands reach back and curl the fingers easily into me, stroking in and out as he grabs a fistful of my hair. I moan around him, choking and sputtering on spit and precum as he fucks my mouth and fingers my pussy at the same time.

“Throat muscles still frozen, princess?”

What?

He continues to thrust into my mouth, his fingers curling deep against my g-spot.

“Can. You. Swallow,” he grunts. “I’d answer quickly if I were you.”

I nod my head, whimpering as his thick cock hits the back of my throat.

“*Good*.”

Suddenly he groans, pushing himself deep. His cock swells even harder and thicker, until suddenly, I feel it throbbing and pulsing violently against my tongue.

Holy shit.

He’s coming.

The first jets of it surge down my throat, and I instinctively start to swallow. Another spurt fills my mouth. Then another. And another.

I can’t get it down my throat fast enough. I choke as I moan around him, feeling his cum leaking out of my mouth and trickling down my chin and cheeks. Takeshi pulls out, his chiseled, perfect jaw clenching as he strokes himself.

More ropes of hot cum splatter down onto my lips, neck, and breasts, which he smears over my skin with the head of his dick.

I’m still trying to catch my breath and swallow what’s left in my mouth when he starts to slide down my body, lower and lower, moving off me entirely and grabbing my pajama pants and panties where they’re still tangled at my knees. He yanks them down and off my legs. Then, without warning, he shoves my thighs wide apart.

My face turns crimson as I watch him crawl between my legs like a jungle animal stalking prey. He lowers his mouth, his breath hot and teasing across my throbbing, swollen pussy.

His dark gaze slides venomously up to me.

“What’s yours, wife…” His mouth dips. “*Is mine*.”

My entire body jolts when his mouth hums against my pussy. My back arches like I’ve been electrocuted, my mind going blank as I feel his tongue drag through my lips. He plunges it inside me, making my eyes roll back in insane pleasure.

Holy. *Fuck*.

It feels like he’s fucking me with his tongue, trying to devour me from the inside out. I melt into the bed as I feel it pushing in and out of me, sending me reeling. His tongue drags up to my clit. I’m spasming again as he licks and swirls his tongue across my aching bud. His lips fasten around it, and then, without warning, he starts to suck.

Sweet fucking *fuck*.

What I felt before was like Heaven.

This is pure sin from the depths of Hell.

I've never felt this level of pure, animalistic pleasure before. His tongue dances and swirls around my throbbing clit, his cheeks hollowing as he sucks hard. I whimper when his fingers push into me, stroking in and out as he torments my clit in the most mind-blowing way possible.

Takeshi's hand pushes up my body, grabbing my breast and twisting my nipple before pushing higher. He cups my jaw, fingers pushing through the cum still on my face. His fingers slip into my mouth, and I suck automatically, tonguing the salty-sweet cum from his fingers as his mouth sends me into oblivion.

Suddenly, I'm coming—harder than I *ever* have in my life.

The explosion starts in my core and blasts outward to my extremities. My head snaps back, a ragged choke of pleasure sticking in my throat as I grip the sheets tightly in my fists. My hips arch, grinding against his tongue until finally I collapse onto the bed, shuddering and quivering.

I whimper and jerk as Takeshi's tongue swipes once more over my clit. He pulls back and suddenly twists his head and lowers his mouth back to the apex of my thigh, right next to my pussy.

What the fuck is—*SHIT*.

I jolt again violently when he bites me, *hard*. Like, so fucking hard that I can feel warm liquid trickling down my inner thigh.

The fucker just bit me hard enough to *draw blood*.

His mouth drops to the bite, his tongue teasing over it as he sucks on my skin. I'm frozen—partly still because of the venom. But even if it had worn off, I would have no fucking idea how to react to this.

I know how my body *wants* to react to this. But the shame I feel stops me cold.

I shouldn't like this.

I shouldn't like *any part* of this. I'm basically immobile. I didn't, wasn't even *able* to consent to this.

And yet that makes what just happened *outrageously* hot.

Takeshi gives my wound one last long, slow lick. Then he’s sliding back up my body. Before I know what he’s doing, he’s grabbing a fist of my hair at the back, leaning down, and crushing his mouth to mine.

He apparently doesn’t give a shit that his cum is still all over my lips and in my mouth. His tongue dances with mine anyway, and the taste of salty cum and coppery blood mixed together fills my mouth.

It tastes like both sweetest sin and fiercest damnation.

“What’s a wedding night without a little blood on the sheets,” Takeshi growls as he pulls away.

He slides off me and stands, pulling his clothes back on. Then he turns and moves back to the edge of the bed. I shiver, still partially frozen as he smears a finger over my lips and pushes it into my mouth.

God help me, I suck it clean.

“*Good girl*.”

My pulse skips as he leans close, his breath warm against my ear. “Remember this, princess,” he murmurs, his voice soft yet commanding. “Next time, there won’t be any holding back.”

As if there was anything *approaching* the definition of “holding back" with what just occurred here.

Then he’s gone, leaving me sprawled naked and alone in the dark, with nothing but the echoes of his words and his lingering touch.

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15

KATARINA

THE SUNLIGHT STREAMING through the window is too bright and clean for how filthy I feel.

I stand under the pounding spray of the shower, letting the scalding water wash away everything—the venom, the tension, the memory of his hands on my skin and his voice in my ear.

The water is far too hot, but I don't turn it down. The burn keeps me grounded, focused. Steam fills the room, wrapping me in a haze that does nothing to clear the whirling thoughts in my head.

Last night was…a mess. But it's one I can't stop replaying.

As soon as the venom wore off and I could move again, around two in the morning, I hobbled to the bathroom, to this very shower. I scrubbed my skin until it was raw, trying to wash away the unwelcome heat that Takeshi left in his wake.

Until my body betrayed me, that is, and instead of rubbing myself clean of him, I rubbed my clit raw, shame flooding every movement, even though the need was unbearable.

Now, in the harsh light of day, I'm back in the shower, scrubbing again, as if I can undo what happened and the way I responded to him.

When the water finally turns cold I step out, wrapping a towel around my body. My reflection in the mirror is blurred by steam, but there's no hiding

the faint flush in my cheeks or the shadows under my eyes.

My gaze drifts lower, to the scar across my abdomen. The pale, jagged line has faded with time, but it’ll never completely go away. My fingers brush over it lightly, the memory slicing into me with surgical precision.

Their family name was Chibari, and they were a powerful Yakuza clan that once rivaled my family for power and in influence.

Today, you won’t find a single mention of their name or a shred of proof of their once far-reaching power. It’s like they’ve been erased from existence.

Because they have been.

That would be my father’s doing.

I was nine when Nakamoto Chibari sent his men to kidnap me from the park where I was playing. They slaughtered my nanny and guards, took me hostage, and kept me in a completely dark, cold, wet basement for almost a week, trying to destroy my father.

The dark was suffocating, an endless void that swallowed my screams and left me a shattered wreck. Then came the day I thought they'd found me, when I heard the commotion upstairs and Ryu’s voice shouting.

My father and his men were here to rescue me!

That's when Nakamoto’s men panicked. They grabbed me, shoved me into the back of a car, and tried to flee.

They didn’t get far.

In the attempted escape from the Ishida-kai men, my kidnappers’ car smashed through a guardrail and off a cliff. All I remember is the deafening cacophony of metal and screams, and then the silence.

When I woke up, I was broken, both physically and emotionally. Metal shrapnel had torn through me, destroying one ovary and leaving the other severely damaged.

The doctors said I’d never have children. At nine, I didn’t fully grasp what that meant.

I've heard the saying "what does not kill you makes you stronger" about a million times since then. No. What doesn't kill you *doesn't* make you stronger. It makes you harder. More Scarred and walled off.

Different than you were before.

Okay, maybe that's a kind of strength, but… It's a lonely one.

I shake off the memory, wrapping the towel tighter around myself. I reach for the small pill case on the counter, popping a single birth control pill onto my palm and swallowing it dry.

Obviously, I don't take these to not get pregnant. Even if I physically could, unless my name has changed to Mary and I'm suddenly in a manger in Bethlehem, I'm pretty sure getting pregnant without ever having had sex is an impossibility.

But they do help with regulating my cycle. So I take them.

The pill's bitter aftertaste lingers on my tongue as I turn away from the mirror resolutely. Dwelling on the past won't change anything. Right now, I need to focus on the present.

This marriage to Takeshi was supposed to end the feud between the Ishida-kai and the Mori-kai and give me the leverage I need to lead as a woman in a patriarchal world.

But… What the fuck is in it for Takeshi?

That's the part I still don't get. What does he himself gain? Peace is beneficial to both families, of course. But Takeshi doesn't strike me as the type to value peace for peace's own sake. There's something else driving him that I can't see yet.

And until I figure out what it is, I can't trust him.

* * *

LATER, I'm sitting across from Ryu in one of the smaller conference rooms, the door closed to ensure privacy. His expression is grim as ever, but there's

a flicker of curiosity in his eyes as he looks at me.

“You have reason to distrust him,” he observes bluntly.

I don’t respond immediately, fingers drumming on the table. Ryu’s right, of course. I *don’t* trust Takeshi. But voicing that feels like admitting defeat and giving him an edge he doesn’t need.

Ryu smiles grimly. “Good. Neither do I.” His brow furrows. “Do you think he was behind the poisoning at the wedding?” he asks after a moment.

Guilt twists in my stomach.

“I don’t know,” I sign. “Although he’s certainly capable of something like that.”

It's the least shitty answer. It *sort of* shifts blame away from the Vorobev Bratva. I’m also not explicitly pointing fingers at Takeshi.

All because I’m an asshole and a coward and can’t bring myself to admit to Papa or Ryu that I’m the one who poisoned a cup of sake at my own fucking wedding ceremony to…what…*play a prank* on the groom?

Yeah, sure. Just hand me the keys to the kingdom with zero concerns, father.

“But he did drink it, too,” I add.

Ryu nods quietly, thinking.

“Keep your eyes and ears open, Ryu. If you see or hear anything that points to him…”

He smiles grimly, drawing a line across his neck with his finger.

“I’ll happily address the problem,” he says bluntly.

I smile weakly at him. “Thank you,” I sign.

We exchange a few more words about logistics and security, but my mind is elsewhere, turning over the question: what *does* Takeshi get out of this?

That’s where the mystery is, and where my distrust lies. No way he agreed to this union out of the goodness of his heart.

After Ryu and I part company, I find Nina in the kitchen, picking at a plate of fruit while idly scrolling her phone, Furrcules pawing at a tennis ball at her feet. She looks up as I enter, her expression brightening.

“Hey!” she beams. “Looks like you’re back on your feet just fine.”

I grab a cup of coffee and slide into a chair across from her. I grin when Furrcules shoves his fuzzy face against my knees, nuzzling me and purring loudly as I reach down to scratch under his chin.

“Pretty much,” I sign. “Still a little unsteady, but I’ll get there.”

“Well, you’ve achieved every girl's dream of a wedding nobody will ever forget. So there’s that?”

I roll my eyes.

We sit together, sipping our coffees for another minute before the weight of it all finally comes crushing down on me.

Goddammit.

“I…have to tell you something,” I gesture glumly.

Nina smirks. “Is this the part where you admit to poisoning the sake yourself?”

My eyes widen and my mouth falls open.

“You knew?!” I sign animatedly.

She giggles. “Kat, this might come as a shock, but after eleven years, I *kinda* know you better than you know yourself—or close to it.”

I bury my face in my hands.

Nina snickers. “Plus, I was right there. I heard Takeshi say ‘I hope you know your doses’, which confused the hell out of me until everything that happened next.” She arches a brow at me. “Pufferfish venom, hmm? Did someone discover a poetic streak?”

“What the fuck am I going to do?” I sign at her, exhaling. “Papa’s going to start a war with Sergey over this if he thinks it’s him.”

“Radical idea, but maybe tell the truth?”

I shoot her a look. “Would *you* tell Kolya Ishida that you’d sown chaos and disorder at your own wedding when now is the worst time for either of those things?”

“Fair,” Nina says with a grimace. She sighs. “Look, I’ll try to lean on your dad. Maybe make some…subtle suggestions.”

“Could you?”

Nina’s been sort of acting like a personal assistant to Papa for the last few months, which puts her in a unique position to get in his ear about something like this in a way I’m, ironically, too close to him for.

“I’ll try,” she shrugs. “For what it’s worth I talked with him this morning, and he’s already doubting it was Sergey. Not his style, I guess.”

Thank God.

My phone buzzes in the pocket of my white linen pants. I pull it out and instantly feel my face flush when I read the text.

TAKESHI

Are you able to move yet? Or are you still trapped in bed covered in my cum? If it’s the second, my cock is hungry for your mouth again. I'll be there in five.

I will the heat away from my cheeks as I angrily hammer out a reply.

ME

Has anyone ever told you how off-putting you are?

TAKESHI

Only my therapists. Women usually find me charming.

ME

Trust me, there is zero percent chance that any woman ever has found you even the least little bit charming. You’re deranged.

TAKESHI

Sticks and stones, princess. So, are you immobilized in bed or not? I'm quite hard and I want to fuck your mouth again before lunch.

Traitorous heat pools between my thighs as I shift in my seat.

Why the *fuck* does him talking to me like this turn me on? I mean, seriously self, get help.

Across from me, Nina stands up, glancing at her phone. "The boss calls," she says dryly. "Meaning your dad, if that wasn't clear."

"Good luck," I sign back, grinning, as she slips from the kitchen. Then I glance back at my phone, scowling at Takeshi's messages.

ME

What do you really want?

TAKESHI

I think I was fairly explicit just now.

ME

What ELSE.

TAKESHI

Fine. What I want is for you to stop trying to box me the fuck out.

A shiver runs down my spine, part nerves, part anticipation. I remember my talk with Ryu this morning, establishing more…*precautions* when it comes to Takeshi and Ishida-kai inner circle business.

As in, he doesn't get to be privy to things just because we're married now.

I type back quickly, fingers steady despite the flutter in my chest.

ME

I have no idea what you're talking about, husband.

His reply is almost instant.

TAKESHI

You keep using that word. But we still haven't consummated this thing.

ME

And we won’t.

The next message takes longer to come through, but when it does, it sends my heartrate skyrocketing.

TAKESHI

Why don’t we stop playing this game where you pretend you don’t want me to fuck you. That you don’t crave me hunting you in the dark like prey and forcing you to take me with a hand around your silent throat, or perhaps a blade against your skin. You have dark preferences, princess. And I can tell you, ignoring them doesn’t make them go away. So here’s how this will go: no more games. You either tell me no right now, or else I push you into that dark place you seem to be simultaneously terrified of and desperate to get to.

I stare at the screen. The room feels smaller, the air heavier, as though his presence has seeped through the phone itself.

Before I can respond, Nina barges into the kitchen, her face pale.

“Kat!” she screams. I drop my phone to the table and spring to my feet in a panic. “It’s your dad.”

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16

TAKESHI

THE ENGINE hums low and steady beneath me as I sit astride my motorcycle, fingers drumming on the handlebars. Outside the Mori compound, Tokyo stretches endlessly in all directions, a sea of lights and concrete.

For a long time, Kyoto, not Tokyo, was home. It's where Dad first built the Mori-kai empire. Where Kenzo first went when he returned to Japan looking to connect with that side of his heritage, and where he bumped into Sota, an old friend of our dad's who took Kenzo under his wing.

Our recent move to Tokyo is about power, about expanding an empire and laying down foundations here that will turn this into a dynasty. But ultimately, Kyoto will always be "home" to the Mori family. I know it's where Kenzo and Annika want to start their family—one that they're supposedly actively trying for these days.

Mal and Freya *tolerate* Tokyo, but Kyoto is where they feel at peace, which is something they both deserve after the lives they've had.

My sister Hana and Damian will probably be on the move for a while. They love Tokyo, but Kyoto is where Hana has her jazz club, and New York will also always call to them, too.Me, I've never really known where to call home. For much of my life, it was the manor home in the English countryside where our mother raised us and Akira helped me become the man I am today. Kyoto was fantastic while I was there—racing through the mountain roads on my bikes, basically living out of the garage.

I’d been to Tokyo before, but it wasn’t until we moved into the city, set up our operations and bought this compound that I really started to get a sense of it.

I like it here.

A lot.

It’s loud. It bleeds neon and excitement. It’s endlessly, relentlessly "on". In a weird way, it speaks to me like no other place I’ve ever lived has.

But tonight, my mind isn’t on the city. It’s on *her*.

Katarina.

She’s been a key piece on a chessboard no one even knows I’m playing for longer than she, or anyone else, knows.

That’s how I saw her at first—a pawn. A means to an end. The plan was always to marry her to gain access to the Ishida-kai and efficiently stake the Mori-kai’s claim on Tokyo. But she’s proving to be far more complicated than I anticipated.

…It would appear that I like complicated.

“You look like hell.” Kenzo’s voice cuts through the quiet. I glance up as he approaches, wearing his usual scowl that deepens whenever he’s about to lecture me.

“You sure know how to boost a guy’s ego,” I say dryly, getting off my bike. “What’s up?”

Kenzo doesn’t answer right away. Instead, he glances around at the city looming around us, inhaling slowly.

“Gun to your head: this place or Kyoto?”

“Depends.”

He smirks as he glances at me. “On?”

“How big the gun is, cause I’m dodging the question.”

My brother chuckles. “I like Tokyo. But I think what I like most about it is what we can *make* from it. Kyoto, though…”

“I get it,” I shrug. “It’s where you and Annika fell in love.”

He smiles. “Look at you, so romantic all of a sudden.”

“Must be my newly minted married status.”

Kenzo sighs. “I’m still mad at you about that, you know.”

“Which I fail to understand. It was always part of our plan, right?”

He frowns. “Yeah, until you jumped the gun on our timeline by about six months.”

Originally, yes, Kenzo was in on my plan to infiltrate the Ishida-kai—although I may have sold him on the idea by presenting it as way for me to diffuse tensions with Kolya.

I didn’t mention my other reasons for wanting to slip under the Ishida-kai's skin. And I *certainly* didn’t tell him what sped up that timeline.

“I have to know…” Kenzo begins, eying me warily.

“What?”

“Was that you, at the wedding?”

I raise an eyebrow. “You think I poisoned myself at my own wedding.”

“Look, I already know there’s a thousand things about this whole operation that you’re not telling me. I’m choosing to ignore that. I just want to know what your angle was if you *did*—”

“I didn’t poison myself and my bride at our wedding, Kenzo.” I tap my temple. “I’m crazy—not nuts.”

He waves a hand. “No one says you’re crazy, brother.”

“*Everyone* does,” I grin. “And they’re right. Still wasn’t me, though.”

“Then we have bigger problems. I’ve heard about you royally pissing off Sergey Vorobev by kicking his son out of the race to marry Katarina. If it

was him—”

“Wasn’t Sergey,” I say dismissively, leaning back against the bike.

Kenzo narrows his eyes. “How can you be sure?”

I take a moment, weighing if I should tell him. Hell, it doesn’t really matter. “It was Katarina.”

He freezes. “*What*?”

“My bride,” I say with a nonchalant shrug. “She laced the third bowl.”

“Fuck off,” Kenzo groans, shaking his head and smirking, waiting for the “gotcha”. When it doesn't come, he freezes and glances around, checking to make sure no one else can hear before he leans closer. “You’re fucking serious?”

I nod.

“That doesn’t make sense. Why would she—”

“Why *not*?” I counter, crossing my arms. “She wanted to show she’s not to be fucked with.”

“Why the hell would she do that?”

“Probably because I’ve been fucking with her,” I shrug. “Anyway, it’s a move I can respect.”

“*Respect*?” Kenzo’s voice is incredulous. “We had a plan, Takeshi. You marry her, secure the alliance, and stabilize the families. Not piss everyone off so much that your new wife tries to kill you at your own wedding.”

“Plans change,” I say simply.

Kenzo stares at me for a long moment. Then he exhales sharply, running a hand through his hair. “You’re playing a dangerous game, little brother.”

“When am I not?”

“Tak!” he snaps. “If this falls apart, it’s war. A real war. And you know what that means.”

“Yes, I do,” I say, my voice dropping to a dangerous edge. “But this *isn’t* going to fall apart. I’ve got this, okay?”

I…don’t. Not in some grand master plan way. Honestly, I’ve been shooting from the hip ever since I set foot in Kolya’s dining room and blew up his plans to link Katarina with that drunk fuck Rodion.

But as long as I can get to the point that I can carry out my real mission?

That’s all I need.

Kenzo clearly isn't convinced but doesn’t argue further. He just turns, his gaze drifting toward the city.

“Don’t forget why we’re here,” he says at last, his voice quieter. “Or let her distract you.”

I don’t respond. After a moment he turns and walks away, leaving me alone with my thoughts.

Too late.

* * *

HANA FINDS me in the study later. She doesn’t knock—she never does—just strides in like she owns the place, her sharp eyes scanning me in the way only she can.

“What is it?” I ask without looking up from where I'm perched on the edge of the desk with a glass of whiskey in hand.

“Something’s…wrong,” she says, crossing her arms.

“I’m not sure if you heard, *dear sister*,” I growl, taking a sip of my drink, “but I was actually poisoned at my own wedding.”

She rolls her eyes. “Yeah, I was there. In fact, I was one of the ones who helped drag your heavy ass into the side room. Remember?”

“Nope. See my earlier comment about *being poisoned*.”

Hana snorts, and then nods at the drink in my hand. “Is that an indication of how married life is going?”

“*My* married life is just fine, thanks,” I mutter. “How’s yours?”

Immediately, she grins.

I love that for her.

I have to say, although I had my doubts about Damian when we first met, I like him for my sister. He might be almost as batshit crazy as me, but…I mean… She spent most of her life tied to *my* hip. I can’t imagine her with a normal dude.

“Great,” she says with another grin. “Although Damian’s been traveling a lot for Kir.”

Damian’s uncle, Kir Nikolayev, is the head of the Nikolayev Bratva, which is one of the five families of the Iron Table.

In other words, he’s seriously powerful. And Damian is his heir.

“So…now that you’ve successfully turned the questions on me…” My sister smirks, plucks the glass out of my hand and sips as she crosses to the window and sinks into a chair.

“I was drinking that.”

Hana ignores me. “Are you going to answer the question?”

“Like I said, my married life is just fine.”

“I know you well enough to smell your bullshit a mile away.”

There *is* a scent of bullshit to what I’m saying. But it’s not about Katarina.

“What?” I shrug. “Katarina’s full of surprises.” I slide off the desk and walk over to the bar cart to grab myself a replacement drink. “She’s not what I expected, and that makes her… interesting.”

Hana’s lips press to a thin line. “What are you *really* doing, Takeshi?”

I lean back against the desk with my glass, letting a slow smile spread across my face. “Following the plan, sister. Marry the princess…secure the alliance…and keep the peace.”

“Bullshit,” Hana says, stepping closer. “I know you. This isn’t just about peace or alliances. There’s something else driving you that you’re not telling even me.”

I hold her gaze for a moment before looking away. “You’re imagining things.”

She steps back, clearly unconvinced, her expression softening slightly. “Just be careful, Takeshi. Don’t let…whatever this is…consume you.”

“I’m always careful,” I say, lifting my glass in a mock toast.

Hana just shakes her head and walks out, leaving me alone with the ghosts she’s stirred up.

When she’s gone, I end up wandering down into the basement of the compound and to my “ladies”.

AKA, my bikes.

Most of my harem—yep, still talking about motorcycles here—are still back in Kyoto. But I brought a select few with me when I made the move to Tokyo. I trail my fingers over them until I get to the forest green with gold trim BSA Y13—a 750cc engine V-twin from 1937.

It sticks out like a sore thumb amongst my collection of—mostly—far more modern racing bikes. But this particular set of wheels carries a lot more than just an engine for me.

This was Akira’s.

I don’t think about him often, partly because it still stings to consider someone killed him. And partly because life just—goes on, I guess. But Hana’s words bring him to the forefront of my mind, a memory I can’t suppress.

I was fourteen when he came into my life. Kenzo and Mal had already gone to Japan, leaving me and Hana behind to deal with our mother’s spiraling

illness. She was deep in her Lewy body dementia by then, barely recognizing us most days. It was a lonely, angry time, and I was drowning in it.

Then Akira appeared. He wasn't just a mentor, though. He saw me. The real me. The darkness I carried, the violent impulses I couldn't control. And instead of being afraid, he embraced them, taught me how to channel them, how to control the chaos inside me.

And then he was gone. Kolya made Akira disappear.

There are myriad reasons for me marrying Katarina.

But one thing's for sure: this game ends with Kolya answering for what he did.

Even if I have to go through her to do it.

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17

KATARINA

TAKESHI

Be outside in fifteen minutes. Wear comfortable clothes and walking shoes.

IT'S LATE when I descend the stairs to the main foyer of my father's house and read his text again.

What am I doing?

WHY am I doing this?

I frown as I re-read my response from thirteen minutes ago.

ME

Why would I do that?

TAKESHI

Because you're tired of never knowing.

ME

Never knowing what?

TAKESHI

If you're brave enough to go through with it. Twelve minutes.

Two of my father's guards materialize out of the shadows near the front door.

“Ms. Katarina,” one of them grunts as they both bow deeply. “I wasn’t aware you were going out tonight. Let me call your driver—”

I shake my head, bringing up a blank doc on the notes app on my phone and typing an explanation that I show him.

“No need, thank you. I’m going for a drive with my husband.”

The guard’s brow cocks. He glances at the other man.

“I’ll need to check with Kolya-sama…”

He trails off when I snatch the phone back and hammer out a quick response.

“I am neither seven years old, nor a prisoner of this house. I’m essentially your boss. Let me rephrase: move the fuck out of my way, because I’m going out. The end.”

The two guards instantly straighten and bow stiffly.

“Apologies, Katarina-san,” the first one mumbles. “We’re simply on high alert after the wedding—”

I step out the front doors and trot down the steps. As if on cue, like he was waiting for me in the shadows, a sleek, matte-black and chrome motorcycle rumbles up the drive from the direction of the front gates and pulls up, the engine a low, purring growl.

My heart thuds with a mix of curiosity and unease as Takeshi kills the engine and sets his feet down, his black boots crunching on the gravel drive. He swings a leg over, turning toward me as he yanks off his black helmet. He’s in black jeans, a black leather riding jacket, and a white t-shirt.

He doesn’t speak right away, just leans against the bike, his expression a calculated mask of arrogance and something darker. Finally, he tilts his head toward me.

“Get on,” he says smoothly.

I hesitate. “Where are we going?” I sign.

“Does it matter?”

I narrow my eyes at him, but he doesn’t flinch. It’s a silent battle of wills that ends when I let out a slow breath and walk toward the bike. He smirks as he pulls a helmet out of the side bag and hands it to me.

“I still don’t know what your text meant,” I sign.

“You'll see.”

He takes my hand and helps up onto the bike, a faint smirk tugging at his lips.

“Chivalry isn’t dead, after all,” I sign sarcastically as he gets on in front of me.

“I wouldn’t get used to it, princess,” he murmurs before revving the engine again.

The drive is silent but tense as the neon city streaks by us. It’s weird to be holding on to him so tightly as he roars through Tokyo and feel so at peace, given how *un*-peaceful a man he is.

But I do.

Takeshi doesn’t offer any hints about our destination, and I’ve learned better than to press him when he’s in this mood. Besides, I don’t dare pull even one hand away from him to ask any questions right now, not the way he's driving.

I watch the cityscape fade into quieter, more remote streets, the buildings growing farther apart until we’re surrounded by nothing but the trees of Denenchofu, in Ota Ward—a *wildly* expensive, exclusive area of Tokyo known for its lavish homes.

He pulls up to a wrought iron gate with a long, winding driveway behind it, and I frown as the structure at the end comes into view.

The mansion is massive, looming dark and almost abandoned against the gray sky, like something out of a gothic horror novel. The windows are dark, some of them boarded up, and the plants, shrubs, and trees all around the exterior are overgrown and wild. But the gates at the entrance are new—gleaming, reinforced steel, outfitted with cameras.

My questions only multiply when Takeshi punches in a code at the gates and they instantly part. He drives through, winding up the long driveway past the overgrown trees and snarled branches. We come to a stop at the massive steps up to the front door, and he kills the engine, kicks down the stand, and swings his leg over to dismount.

“What is this place?” I sign after he helps me off.

Takeshi glances at me briefly. “Home.”

My stomach twists. “Home?”

He turns to look up at the house for a minute before turning back to me, his eyes gleaming.

“Come on,” he growls quietly.

The inside of the mansion is as unsettling as its exterior. The air is thick with dust and abandonment, although recent signs of construction are evident—scaffolding, tools, and stacks of lumber litter the wide, echoing hallways. The faint smell of fresh paint and drywall mingles with the mustiness, creating a strange contrast.

Takeshi walks ahead of me, his step unhurried but purposeful. I follow, my eyes darting to the shadows that linger just out of view.

“You remember your friend Miyamoto?” he says, his voice breaking the eerie silence.

My jaw clenches.

Yeah, I remember the man who had me kidnapped before he tied me up and balanced me on a fucked up, booby-trapped seesaw opposite Hana Mori.

“It rings a bell,” I sign dryly.

Takeshi shrugs. “This was his house.”

I shiver, looking around. I’ve heard mixed things through the grapevine about Miyamoto’s fate. I mean he’s almost certainly dead, but no one in the Tokyo underworld seems to know exactly what the fucker's fate *was*.

“What happened to him?” I sign.

Takeshi pauses, turning to face me. His lips curl into a slow, chilling smile. “I killed him. Right there, actually.” He gestures to a spot on the floor a few feet away, as if he’s pointing out a particularly interesting piece of furniture rather than the site of someone’s death.

My throat goes dry. “Why would you bring me here?”

His smile deepens, and there’s both alarming and exciting in the way he steps nearer, closing the distance between us. “Because it’s dark,” he says, his voice dropping lower. “And there’s lots of space.”

The chill in the air sinks into my skin. “Space?”

He doesn’t answer. Instead, he reaches into his coat and pulls something out that sends my pulse into a frantic rhythm when I see it.

The *oni* mask. The same all-black, blank, freakishly terrifying one from the night of the initiation.

He slips it over his face with practiced ease, the demonic grin and sharp eyes transforming him, making him savage and wild. My breath catches as he takes another step toward me, the sound of his boots echoing against the hardwood.

“Space to *run*,” he growls, his voice distorted by the mask.

I take an involuntary step back, my heart pounding so loud I barely hear his next words.

“And you do want to run, don’t you, princess?” he murmurs, tilting his head. “Just like you want me to chase you, and catch you, and *fuck* you?”

My back hits the wall and I’m suddenly hyper-aware of how alone we are in this cavernous, crumbling house. The dim light casts long shadows across the floor, making everything appear larger, more threatening.

“Don’t worry,” he says, his tone almost soothing. “There’s an out, if you need it. Your safe word will be Whisper.”

I tremble. “Leave my hands free,” I sign quickly.

His laugh is low, wrapping around me like smoke. “No promises there.”

“If you don't, I can’t—”

“I know,” he interrupts, his voice soft but edged with steel. He steps even closer, the mask’s grotesque features mere inches from my face. “Now, are we going to play?”

My breath hitches. “And if I say no?”

“Oh, princess,” he growls, his voice a low rumble that almost reverberates through the walls. “I *truly* hope you do.”

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18

KATARINA

THE DARK MANSION FEELS ALIVE. Every creak of the floorboards beneath my feet, every breath of wind sighing through the cracked windows, feels amplified. My pulse thrums in my ears, drowning out everything else.

“I’m giving you a ten second head start. Now…”

The demonic mask grins at me, taunting me, setting the tone of the vicious game we’re about to play. His broad frame is illuminated by the faint sliver of moonlight slipping through the gaps in the boarded-up windows.

“*Run*.”

The single word is distorted and guttural through the *oni* mask, the sound making my skin prickle to goosebumps as it teases over me.

I don’t need to be told twice.

Instantly I whirl, my feet pounding against the warped wood as I sprint down the hallway, my breath gasping and uneven. The old house groans around me, each sound sinister and clawing.

Somewhere in the gloom behind me, I hear the low, dark sound of his cold laughter echoing after me, nipping at my heels.

I push forward, adrenaline surging through my veins. There’s pure fear, of course—like I’ve plunged through ice into an unmerciful frozen river that’ll sweep me away to my doom—but at the same time, the heady thrill of this

is undeniable, a mix of fear and exhilaration that sends shivers down my spine.

“Ready or not, princess…” His voice rumbles from the blackness. “*Here I fucking come…*”

Behind me, I hear his footsteps, steady and unhurried. He’s not running. He doesn’t need to.

Obviously, Takeshi knows the mansion in a way I don't. He’s using that both to toy with me and possibly box me in to some dead end. I jog right, bolting through a dusty, half-looted kitchen with debris scattered all over the floor. Then I swerve left, pelting headlong through a dining room, my feet crunching on what feels like dozens of shattered dishes.

I dart into a side room, slamming the door shut behind me and pressing my back against it. My chest heaves as I struggle to calm my breathing, straining to hear any sign of him. The silence is deafening, pressing into my ears and making me question my senses.

And then: the creak of a floorboard, close.

My heart leaps into my throat as a door handle rattles, and I freeze, bracing for the inevitable. But the door doesn’t open. There’s just a low, sinister chuckle, muffled by the mask.

“You can’t hide, princess,” he growls, his voice a dark melody that sends chills down my spine. “I can *smell* your fear.”

I bite back a gasp, edging away from the door. There’s no lock. My only option is to run.

I bolt toward the opposite door, my legs shaking as I cross into another hallway. The house is a huge maze, each corridor almost identical to the last, and I have no idea where I’m heading. My only goal is to keep moving and stay ahead of him as long as I can.

I can hear his footsteps heavier and faster now. He’s gaining on me. My body screams in protest as I force myself on, my breath coming in desperate gasps. The walls start to close in around me, darkness wrapping me in its suffocating embrace.

I bolt through a doorway into an enormous library, dusty and hung with cobwebs, its shelves of old leather-bound books looming over me as I almost trip over a pile of them. I catch myself and I whirl, my eyes searching the gloom for another doorway.

Then a hand wraps tight around my throat from behind.

Raw fear *explodes* inside me, hitting with such force that it feels like I'm plunging through ice again. My legs stop working as he grabs me by the throat and hip, spinning me around and slamming me against a bookshelf. Dust shakes loose, blurring my vision as the *oni* mask leers grotesquely down at me, mocking me as he pushes me against the shelves, his grip unyielding.

"*Look what I found…*" he rasps monstrously.

Suddenly, he grabs the neck of my t-shirt and rips downward. My eyes bulge as he tears the shirt wide open, down to my stomach. His hand pushes inside, yanking my bra down and mercilessly pawing at my breasts.

I choke back a whimpered moan as his rough fingers pinch a swollen nipple, twisting and pulling until pleasure and pain blur to a red mist.

His hand drops lower, pushing roughly between my thighs to cup my pussy through my yoga pants. I shudder as he grinds his palm against me, rubbing me hard through the tights.

"What a *pliant* little slut I've caught," the demon snarls.

Reality rips through me as I shove at him, bringing my knee up, but he rams it to the side, making me wince as he pins me harder against the dusty books at my back. He rubs between my legs harder, grinding my slick panties against my swollen clit.

My knee jams up again. This time, even as he dodges it, he wrenches me around. My breath hitches as I go tumbling to the floorboards, catching myself with my palms, pure adrenaline and chaos exploding throughout my system like napalm.

Then his weight slams down on me, pinning me where I fell. I twist and writhe beneath him, my nails clawing at the hardwood floor, trying to

escape. But he’s too strong.

Too monstrous.

Too determined.

And suddenly, it hits me like a slap in the face.

He’s going to fuck me.

No gentleness. No tenderness. No “going slow.”

I’m not sure if either of us knows we’re playing a game anymore.

His weight presses down on me like a vice. I try to squirm away, but he grabs my hair and yanks it hard enough to send bolts of lighting through my vision. I throw back an elbow but he easily catches it, keeping it in his painfully tight grip. He wrenches me sideways, flipping me onto my back as his full weight slams down on top of me.

The *oni* mask with its mocking grin looms over me.

“Is this the best you’ve got?” he taunts, his voice dripping with venom. “I expected more, *princess*.”

I grit my teeth, refusing to give him the satisfaction of a response. Then I dig my heels into the floor and push off, twisting my body with all the strength I can muster. It’s enough to knock him slightly off balance, and I use the opportunity to swing my arm up, my palm connecting with his face and knocking the mask askew.

The sound echoes through the empty mansion, and for a brief moment, I think I’ve stunned him. But then he laughs, and his gloved hand snaps up, catching my wrist in mid-air as I try to strike again.

“*Feisty*,” he growls. “I like it.”

Before I can react, his other hand lashes out and slaps my cheek. He’s clearly held back on the strength of the slap, but the sting still spreads across my skin for a second, sharp and hot and blinding. What shocks me more is the jolt of fierce need that rushes through me.

Unexpected. Insidious.

I gasp, chest heaving as I glare up at him. His eyes behind the mask are wild, gleaming with untamed, unrelenting savagery. He doesn't give me a moment to recover. His hand moves to my throat again, holding me down as he leans in closer.

"You *wanted* this," he murmurs, his voice a dangerous whisper. "You wanted me to chase you and catch you. And now that I have, you're fucking *mine*."

He yanks a blade from his jeans, glinting faintly in the dim light. I buck and writhe, kicking and hissing as he presses the flat of it against my collarbone, slicing downward with a deliberate, measured motion. The tip catches the fabric of my bra, and with a quick flick of his wrist it snaps free.

His hands follow the blade, rough and insistent, exploring my now-bare skin. I thrash against him, nails digging into his forearm, but it only spurs him on. He cuts the rest of the bra away, then what's left of my t-shirt, leaving me naked from the waist up. His grip tightens. I can feel his breath against my neck as he leans closer.

"Look at me," he commands. "Look at me when I take what's *mine*."

I meet his gaze, my breath hitching when I see the madness in his eyes—the raw, unfiltered darkness that consumes him. There's something else there, too, mirroring the storm raging inside me.

The knife tip drags down the skin of my stomach. He shoves a hand into the waist of my tights, yanking them and my panties away from my body before the blade slashes and cuts, ripping and shredding the last of my clothes away.

My body jolts, my back arching and a silent scream ripping from my throat as his fingers ram into me. Takeshi would never be described as "tender" or "gentle". But there's something especially unmerciful and almost uncaring about him right now that burns hot inside me like a forbidden spark.

Black. Unrelenting.

My fingers claw against the floorboards and slap at his face as he fucks his thick fingers into my pussy over and over, his thumb rubbing my clit with an intensity that has my legs shaking.

“Fight me all you fucking want, *princess*,” he snarls. “Lie to me with the rest of your body. I don’t give a fuck. Your dripping pussy is incapable of speaking anything but the truth.”

He sinks another big finger into me, stretching me out so much it almost hurts, even as it also sends an explosion of pleasure thundering through me.

“That’s it, my little fuck toy,” he hisses darkly. “*Stretch* for me. We’re going to need to get this pussy ready for my cock before I tear into you. Open you up so that I'll *fit* in this tight little hole.”

He rams his fingers into me again and again until everything starts to blur. Then suddenly his fingers slide out, leaving me choking on the need to have them back. To feel that full again.

Takeshi yanks off his jacket and t-shirt, the dim light glinting off the sharp lines of his grooved muscles. I whimper as he grabs my wrists and slams them over my head with one hand, pinning me with his full weight. His other hand reaches down, and my eyes widen when I hear the jangle of his belt and his zipper opening.

Holy fuck.

I whimper as the hot, swollen head of his huge cock pushes against my pussy lips, centering himself right against my opening.

Holy fucking fuck, what am I—

“*Last. Fucking. Chance, princess,*” Takeshi snarls in a voice that sounds more demon than human.

He lifts the mask away, his chiseled jaw rippling with tension. His eyes, wild and intense, bore into mine as he leans down, his lips brushing against my ear.

“Use your fucking safe word,” he growls, his voice a low rumble that sends shivers down my spine.

He releases one of my hands, giving me an opportunity to push him away.

To end this madness.

To stop this game before he takes my virginity on the dirty floor of an abandoned library, my clothes ripped and my skin bruised.

The word tingles in the fingertips of the hand he's released—so close I can almost feel it.

Stop this. Walk away.

Keep this part of you.

But instead of signing my safe word, I do something else.

I crack my palm against his cheek, hard enough to snap his head to the side.

Time stops.

Everything around us freezes, as if the dust itself has stopped moving.

Slowly, his head swivels back toward me, his eyes brimming with a swirling blackness that sucks the air from my lungs. His jaw clenches and his lips curl darkly, pulling his mouth into a cold, leering smile.

"So much for last chances."

His hips rock against me. My eyes widen, my mouth flying open and a choking sound sticking in my throat as he pushes his huge cock into me for the very first time.

Holy fucking FUCK.

It hurts. I mean it fucking *hurts*. He's so fucking big that it feels as if he's cleaving me in two as he drives a third of his length into me in one stroke. My back spasms violently off the floorboards, my thighs shaking around his hips as my head jerks back.

"*So* fucking *tight* for me, little princess," he groans darkly. His mouth dips to my exposed neck, and I shudder when his teeth sink into my skin. But the pierce of pain there, weirdly, erases it from between my legs, if only momentarily, wicking that pain away.

I think Takeshi senses it, because as I gasp from the feel of his teeth on my neck, he rams another few inches into me.

Sweet fucking Jesus.

“Mm, *fuck*,” he groans, his muscles clenching as he pushes deeper. “Your greedy little cunt is sucking me inside, princess. Fucking fight me and pretend you hate me and this all you like, *wife*. I don’t think this messy little pussy got the memo. *Did. It.*”

With that, he slams the rest of the way in.

Every. Single. Thick. Inch.

My body arches violently. It feels like he’s in my throat and reorganizing my fucking organs as he buries himself to the hilt, stretching me like I’ve never even imagined possible.

My body shudders and shakes as he pulls out—not out of mercy or anything like that, just so he can take his fill of me all over again.

My eyes roll back as his cock sinks back in to the hilt. I feel *so* fucking full, so insanely stretched. At the same time, something warm and intense begins to flood my core.

My muscles begin to unclench. The burning, tearing sensation dissolves to something fiercer, needier.

And I’m *wet*.

So, *so* wet.

Takeshi growls, chuckling darkly as he slides out, my slick pussy clinging to him, the friction turning me to jelly.

“Such a *messy* little pussy,” he rasps into the crook of my neck. His hips pound back into me, filling me to the brim as I choke on my silent moans. He’s still got my wrists pinned above my head, and my fingertips claw at the floor as he bites down on my jugular.

Fucking *hell*, it’s like I’m losing my virginity to an animal.

A monster.

Uncaring. Unflinching. Unremorseful.

But the fact that I'm quivering like this says volumes more about me than it does about him.

Takeshi is *exactly* as advertised. A psychopath. A beast. A cold-hearted, darkly savage demon. I knew what his brand of fucking would be when I signed up for this.

But me? No. This isn't supposed to turn me on more than anything else ever has.

I'm not supposed to want this.

I'm not supposed to *enjoy* being fucked against the hard, unyielding floor with the smell of blood in the air and a monster claiming every single part of me.

But I do.

I really, *really* fucking do.

The mix of adrenaline, exquisite pain, and overwhelming pleasure has me clawing at the edges of my sanity as he fucks into me. Takeshi releases my wrists, gripping my throat with one hand as the other grabs my hip possessively. His huge cock rams into me over and over, his pubic bone grinding against my clit as my tight nipples drag against his rock-hard chest.

I slap at his shoulders and his face, tears in my eyes at the sheer madness of this.

"*Yesss, princess*," he snarls darkly. "Fight me. Your resistance only makes your pussy even tighter and sweeter around my hot, hard dick."

Something clicks and shifts inside me, like a last defense crumbling. I can feel it in my core, tightening, fluttering, clenching. My toes curl as my feet kick and my thighs begin to shake.

Oh FUCK…

The whole world goes white and numb as the ball of energy inside me explodes. My body arches sharply off the ground, my eyes wide and my mouth slack, a silent scream exploding from my throat.

Suddenly, the monster thrusting into me is dragging the most explosive orgasm of my life out of me, by force.

“Squeeze my fucking cock, princess,” he hisses. “Let me feel that greedy little cunt milk the cum out of my balls. *Yes, just like that*, princess. Such a good, eager little cum slut for me.”

The wave hits me over and over, shattering me from the inside out as he groans and drives into me. I can feel his cock swelling even harder and thicker. He jerks and twitches inside me, and I let out a silent whimper when the hot rush of his cum spills into me.

Wave after wave.

Flood after flood.

Till madness upon madness drags me under into oblivion.

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19

KATARINA

THE MANSION FEELS EERILY quiet now.

My body aches in places I didn’t know it could, and every brush of the cool night air over my skin is a reminder of the rawness Takeshi left on me. Inside me.

I’m still trembling, my mind a maelstrom of emotions as I lie sprawled on a threadbare rug in the middle of the massive, crumbling library, covered haphazardly with the shredded remains of my clothes.

Takeshi sits propped up beside me against the side of the dusty couch behind us, his chest rising and falling steadily. The *oni* mask lies discarded on the floor a few feet away, its grotesque grin now harmless.

Takeshi’s face, however, is unreadable. He rests his head against the seat of the couch, staring at the peeling ceiling, lost in thought.

I hug my torn clothing around myself. The adrenaline is gone, leaving me raw and exposed, my mind too loud to let me rest.

I wish I could speak, to say something to break the suffocating silence. But even if I could, I don’t know where to start. My mind races with a thousand questions, none of which I’m sure I want the answer to.

“Have you ever heard of a man named Akira Ohno?”

His voice breaks the stillness, the question catching me off guard. I blink, turning my head to look at him. His expression hasn't changed, but there’s a

tension in his body that wasn't there a moment ago.

"No," I sign slowly. "Should I have?"

He looks at me sharply, probing. "You're sure?" he presses. "He may have done business with your father."

I sit up slightly. "Lots of people do business with my father," I reply defensively. "You'll have to narrow it down."

Annoyance lances through me. I know what just happened was no fairytale "sweep me off my feet in a fit of passion" type of thing. I know what this marriage is. I know what we are to each other.

Means to ends.

And that's what tonight was, too: a means to an end. I mean, I'm twenty-two years old. It was high time I finally just got the whole virginity thing over with. And it might as well be with the ridiculously attractive—albeit, psychotic—man that I'm married to. Right?

Still, a girl wants *something* after what we just did. Especially with that level of intensity. My body is aching everywhere with a delicious soreness that I have a feeling will remind me of tonight's events for a week.

I mean, not cuddles and roses. But *something*. Instead, Takeshi is asking me —still naked, I might add— about my father's business dealings. Like, come on.

"Why did you bring me here?"

His brow furrows.

"I would have thought by now that was fairly obvious," he growls with an amused smirk on his face.

"Maybe it's not," I gesture back snappishly. "Was it to fuck me, or to question me about my father's business?"

"Maybe both," he says flatly.

"Asshole," I sign, pushing off the floor with a deep wince as I struggle to my feet. Before I can even stand, Takeshi grabs my thigh and yanks me off

balance. My heart lurches as my unsteady feet betray me.

But before I can topple to the floor, Takeshi pulls me down into his lap, my eyes snapping to his as I brace my hands against his firm chest.

“What the fuck?!” I sign.

“Maybe he was someone your father tortured, not did business with.”

I stare at him, my brow furrowed deeply.

“Are we *still* talking about my father’s business right now?” I motion quickly.

“You were looking for pillow talk?” he grunts back.

“I was looking to not talk about my father *at all* while sitting naked in your lap,” I sign tersely. Then I replay what he just said, and my frown deepens. “And Papa does *not* torture people,” I add indignantly.

Takeshi’s face is blank and unreadable.

“That’s not true.”

“The fuck it isn’t,” I sign back. “My father is brutal—vicious, even. But he’s not a…” I trail off.

“A what,” Takeshi growls.

“Nothing. Forget it.” I push against him, to get off of his lap and away from him. But his hands grip my waist tightly, unyieldingly.

“Not *what,*” he murmurs again.

I stare blankly at him.

“Not a monster?” Takeshi finishes for me, his tone mocking.

I look away, my jaw tightening.

“A monster like…what…” he growls, his voice low.

I hesitate, my mind racing for an answer that won’t set him off further. I can't think of one.

His hands drop, releasing me. Shivering, I stand on shaky legs, moving from his lap to sit on the rug again. My back is to him as I pull the scraps of my clothing around me, hiding my nudity.

“*Like me*?” His voice rumbles behind me, his tone prying and accusatory.

I say nothing.

Neither does he.

The seconds tick by.

Finally, swallowing, I nod.

“Like you,” I sign quietly.

He doesn't respond. I bite my lip, turning to face him.

Takeshi is gone.

For a moment, I just sit there, stunned, unsure what to do. His sudden departure stings, and I’m left with a hollow ache that feels far too familiar. Finally, I pull myself to my feet, wrapping my arms around me and quickly walking out of the room.

Sounds guide me through the creepy abandoned mansion until I finally find him standing dressed at the front door.

I’m about to sign something when he drops a small backpack at my feet.

“There are clothes in there. Get dressed. We’re leaving.”

I don't move.

“I said get the fuck dressed,” he mutters.

“Takeshi,” I sign. “I didn’t mean—”

He ignores me, stepping out the front door and back into the night, leaving me to dress as he starts his bike outside.

The mansion feels colder now, the silence pressing in around me.

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20

KATARINA

THE DAYS BLUR INTO AN ENDLESS, monotonous rhythm of meetings, phone calls, and whispered conversations in corners.

Papa has been in and out of the hospital for tests, each absence leaving a void in the Ishida-kai that I'm expected to fill. He's still who everyone looks to for direction, but now, more than ever, I feel the weight of his legacy pressing down on me. That and the eyes of "his" people looking at me, wondering if and when they'll become "my" people.

Takeshi's a shadow in my periphery—a constant, unsettling presence that I can't shake.

It's been a week since that night in the mansion. We haven't spoken. We've barely even shared space, passing each other in the halls like warring ghosts. Okay, I'm the warring ghost and he's just maddening, placid indifference. Part of me is grateful for it. The other part, the part I don't want to acknowledge?

…It aches for his attention and his chaos, even as I try to convince myself otherwise.

I'm sitting at the long, polished table in one of the conference rooms with Ryu, Nina, and a few other trusted captains. The air is muddied with unspoken concerns as we go over contingency plans for Papa's leadership should his health take a turn for the worse.

It’s a conversation *no one* wants to have, especially not me. But it’s necessary. The Ishida-kai can’t afford uncertainty.

“We need to talk about your husband,” Ryu says. His arms are crossed over his chest, his usual scowl deeper under the weight of the discussion.

I nod, my fingers drumming lightly against the tabletop. “We need to solidify the chain of command. Papa’s made it clear that I’m his successor, but there are some allies who will question my authority without him around to back it up.”

“Takeshi’s presence doesn’t help,” Nina adds softly but firmly. Technically, she’s always just been my translator. But she’s been in the thick of it with our family for so long—more than a decade—that not only is she essentially an Ishida, she also knows what the fuck she’s talking about.

Because of this, I’ve officially made her one of my advisors. She’s seated beside me, her dark hair pulled back into a sleek ponytail. Her blue eyes flick to mine, sharp and calculating.

“The lower ranks are curious about him, intrigued by what he might bring to the table. And of course…”

“He’s a man?” I sign, my lips twisting.

“He's trouble,” Ryu growls. “A wild card. We can’t trust him.”

“Which is why we need to be careful,” I interject firmly, waiting for Nina to translate for the captains who don’t speak sign language. “We’ll keep him close, but not so close that he gains any real influence. For now, he’s just a pawn in the alliance between our families. An accessory. Nothing more.”

Nina arches a brow, a small smirk tugging at the corner of her lips. “An accessory, huh?” she says, switching to Russian as she does when we’re around those who don't speak it and she wants to communicate something secret to me. “Is that what we’re calling him now?”

She gives me a knowing wink that brings a flush to my cheeks.

A few days ago, Nina walked into my room as I was getting out of the shower—nothing surprising about that, she’s seen me without clothes on a

hundred times.

What she *hasn't* ever seen are the vicious, brutal *hickies* that that motherfucker left all over my goddamn body, to the point where Nina was at first legitimately concerned that someone had beaten me with a length of chain.

I shoot her a sharp look. "That's exactly what he is," I sign back.

"Sure," she says, her tone teasing. "Because there's zero chemistry between you two."

I roll my eyes. "Drop the Russian. Japanese, please."

She sighs as I turn back to the table and ask one of my captains to go over some new distribution ideas he'd brought up earlier.

Ryu leans in from my other side.

"You know that my Russian isn't so shit that I can't pick up on gossip like that, yes?"

I feel my face burning as I glance at him. "Nina is just teasing," I sign sharply. "There's not a bit of truth to it."

Ryu snorts, his lips twitching in what might be the closest thing to a smile I've ever seen him make. "Good. The last thing we need is you getting distracted by that jackass."

"I'm not distracted," I sign back, though the heat rising to my cheeks betrays me. I clear my throat. "Let's focus. We need to ensure that if Papa's condition worsens, there's no doubt about who's in charge."

The conversation shifts back to contingency plans but my mind keeps wandering. Nina's words stick with me, irritatingly persistent.

Chemistry.

Please.

She has no idea what she's talking about. Whatever this thing is between Takeshi and me, it's not *chemistry*. It's...darker. More savage. Primal.

And it scares the shit out of me.

The truth is, he does distract me—not in the way Nina meant, but in one that's far more dangerous. His presence is a constant reminder of the darkness I've always carried, the part of me that craves control and chaos in equal measure but that I've tried to bury for years.

The sound of the conference room door opening snaps me out of my thoughts. My heart sinks as Takeshi strides fluidly and confidently into the room, dressed in a crisp black suit that highlights the lines of his lean, powerful frame. He's got this way of wearing suits with this air of disdain that somehow makes him even hotter.

Damn him.

His gaze sweeps over the room, landing on me with an intensity that makes my breath catch.

"Am I interrupting?" he asks, his tone smooth if edged with amusement.

Ryu stiffens beside me. "This is a private meeting."

Takeshi ignores him. "Katarina," he says, his focus entirely on me and his voice softening slightly. "A word?"

"We're busy," Rya grunts.

"*Wife*," Takeshi growls, louder this time, grabbing the full attention of the room. "*A word*."

Ryu shoves his chair back, rising to his feet. "You've got a lot of nerve—"

"Enough," I sign, cutting him off. I stand, smoothing my hands down over my skirt as I level a glare at Takeshi. "Make it quick."

Takeshi's smirk deepens, but he doesn't say anything as he steps aside, gesturing for me to follow him. I hesitate for a moment, glancing at Nina and Ryu. Nina gives me a subtle nod; Ryu looks like he's seconds away from putting his fist through Takeshi's face,

With a sigh, I follow Takeshi out, my heels clicking on the polished floor. He leads me down a hall and into one of the smaller meeting rooms, closing

the door behind us.

The tension between us is palpable as he turns to face me. For a moment, neither of us speaks, the silence stretching on like a taut wire ready to snap.

Finally, I bring my hands up. “What do you want?”

His gaze darkens and his smirk fades as he steps closer. “You’ve been busy,” he says, his voice low. “Meeting with your captains, making plans. I’m impressed.”

“I don’t need your approval,” I sign back sharply. “This is my family. You’re just—”

“An accessory,” he finishes for me, his tone mocking. “You said that earlier, didn’t you?”

I freeze, my stomach dropping. “You were eavesdropping?”

“I’m…thorough,” he says with a shrug. “Don’t worry, princess. I’m not offended. I know what this is.”

“Do you?” I ask, my hands trembling slightly.

He steps closer, looming over me. “You’re scared of me,” he murmurs, his tone almost tender. “But you’re also drawn to me. You can’t help it…can you?”

I swallow hard, my pulse racing. “You’re delusional.”

His lips curl into a slow, dangerous smile. “Maybe I just see you more clearly than anyone else does.”

For a moment, his words leave me unable to breathe, my chest tight under the weight of his gaze. Then I force myself to meet his challenge head-on.

“You don’t know me,” I motion firmly. “You never will.”

His smile widens, sending a shiver down my spine. “We’ll see about that.”

Before I can respond he leaves, the door clicking shut behind him. I’m left standing there, my hands trembling as I press them against the edge of the table to steady myself.

He’s right: I am scared of him. But it’s not just fear, it’s something darker and more dangerous.

That terrifies me even more.

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TAKESHI

HANA'S LAUGHTER follows me as I stalk into the private lounge.

I have no idea what the fuck this room was supposed to be before we bought the Tokyo mansion. But it looks exactly like a VIP room in some gaudy club.

It's all sleek leather and steel, with floor-to-ceiling windows that overlook Tokyo's glimmering skyline. It's a room designed to make anyone sitting in it feel powerful, but right now, it feels stifling. Too bright and exposed.

Hana, of course, is unfazed. She's sprawled across one of the couches, barefoot and smug, her long blonde hair tumbling over her shoulders as she takes another sip of tea.

"So," she begins, her tone girlish and teasing. "How's the happy couple?"

My glare only makes her smirk widen. "Don't start."

"Start what? I'm just making conversation." She sits up, her eyes gleaming with mischief. "But since you're being so grouchy, I'm going to guess things with your little princess are…complicated?"

"Hana…" I warn darkly.

She holds up her hands in mock surrender. "Fine, fine. No more teasing. But seriously, Takeshi, you've got…a look."

"A *look*?" I echo, folding my arms across my chest.

“Yeah, like you’re...I don’t know…smitten or something.”

I straighten, my body going rigid as I fix her with a frigid stare. “I am not, never have been, nor will I *ever* be *smitten* with anything.”

She starts to open her mouth, but I stop her with a raised finger.

“All right, maybe a Kawasaki H2R.” I whistle low. “Yeah, I’d *definitely* be smitten with one of those sexy motherfuckers.”

Hana rolls her eyes. “So what are we calling it, then? Obsession? Lust? Or is it something deeper?”

“We still talking about the Kawasaki?”

“Ass. You know who I’m talking about.”

I don’t answer. It's all the confirmation she needs. She leans back, crossing her legs and studying me like I’m a puzzle she’s determined to solve.

“You’re quiet,” she observes. “That’s not like you.”

“But the cavalier, emotionally walled-off charm interwoven with sarcasm is *painfully* on-brand,” I throw back. “So, we can go ahead and drop it.”

She doesn’t. Hana never drops anything. She’s relentless, a trait we share, although she wields it with much more finesse. “Why her?” she asks softly, the teasing edge in her voice gone.

I grit my teeth, my mind racing with a thousand answers, none of which I’m willing to say out loud. The truth is, I don’t *know* why. Not in a way that makes sense, not really.

I turn back to her, my expression carefully neutral. “It’s not about her. It’s about strategy.”

“You keep saying that, and it sounds lamer and lamer every time. Why aren't you telling me the truth?”

“Believe what you like,” I say sharply. “This is about our family and empire, and securing our position in Tokyo. Nothing more.”

“Yeah, there it is,” she sighs, shaking her head. “Somehow, it managed to sound *even lamer* that last time.”

I hate that she’s right. Because as much as I want to believe this is merely about strategy…about power and revenge and everything else that drives me…there’s a dark, twisted part of me that knows it’s more than that. Katarina isn’t just a chess piece. She’s a storm that’s threatening to overturn the entire goddamn board.

I sink into one of the armchairs, leaning forward and resting my elbows on my knees, staring at the floor.

“It’s not that simple,” I admit, my voice low.

Hana tips her head, her expression softening slightly. “It never is with you.”

I glance up at her, my lips twisting. “You say that like it’s a bad thing.”

“Not necessarily,” she says. “But it’s dangerous. For you. For her.”

I don’t respond, just let the silence stretch between us, my thoughts poking around the dark corners of my mind where I keep the things I’d rather not examine too closely. My obsession with Katarina is one of those. It’s a fire that burns brighter than anything I’ve ever felt, and I don’t know how to control it.

It’s not just about wanting her. It’s about *needing* her. Her fire, her defiance, her darkness. She’s everything I’ve ever craved, and everything I’ve ever feared, and I hate her for it almost as much as I want her because of it.

Hana lets out a soft sigh. “Just... Be careful, Tak. Whatever this is, don’t let it consume you.”

I look up at her, my expression hard. “I don’t *get* consumed. I do the consuming.”

Later, after Hana leaves to FaceTime Damian in New York, I stand by the window, whiskey in hand, my mind drifting back to Katarina and the way she looked at me that night in the mansion, her eyes ablaze with a mix of fear and defiance.

I’ve never met anyone like her. And I hate that she’s under my skin in a way I can’t shake. She’s dangerous, not just because of who she is, but because of how she makes me feel.

No matter how I try to push her out of my mind, she’s *always there*. In the shadows, in the silence, in the dark corners of my soul where I keep the things I don’t want to face.

She’s a mirror, reflecting all the shit I’ve tried to bury.

And that terrifies me.

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22

KATARINA

THE AIR FEELS HEAVIER TONIGHT, pressing on my skin.

Tokyo is alive with its usual chaos, the streets humming with the noise of traffic, chattering passersby, and faint music spilling out from *izakayas* and shops.

Beneath it all, there's a tense edge that keeps me glancing over my shoulder.

I'm walking briskly through a narrow alley, my heels clicking against the pavement. The glow of neon signs reflects softly off the rain-slicked ground, casting distorted shapes that shift and flicker with every step I take.

I can't shake the feeling that I'm being *followed*.

It started a few blocks ago: just a prickling awareness at the back of my neck. At first, I told myself it was nothing—just paranoia brought on by the stress of the last few days. Now, I'm not so sure.

I pause at the mouth of the alley, letting the crowd swallow me for a moment as I surreptitiously scan the area. Nothing stands out; no shadowy figures lurk in the dark. Still, the feeling persists, coiled in my gut like a warning.

My fingers brush against my phone in my pocket. I consider messaging Nina or Ryu, who are nearby, still in the restaurant I just snuck out the back door of while pretending to need the bathroom.

However, calling them means explaining why I’m out here alone after sneaking away, not to mention lying to them in the first place.

My contact reached out to me last night, clearly via a throwaway email account, with just a three-line message:

> ***I have information concerning Takeshi Mori’s real motives. Your life depends on hearing it. Meet me tomorrow at Moshi Moshi Café, Nihonbashikakigaracho, Chuo City.***

I should have said no. Or just not responded at all.

But curiosity is a terrible thing.

That’s what had me suggesting to Nina and Ryu that we move our business meeting to the ultra-exclusive Sugita restaurant in the same Tokyo neighborhood as the cutesy bubble tea shop my mysterious contact proposed.

Because their message hit a nerve and touched on something I’ve been afraid to admit: that there’s something about Takeshi and his motives for marrying me that he’s not telling me.

Right now, though, I’m not even going to the café. I’m taking a circuitous route around the area, trying to shake the feeling that I’m being watched.

Followed.

I turn left and slip into another alley. This one is quieter, the sounds of the city muted by the towering buildings looming on either side. My pace quickens, my unease growing with every step.

Then I hear it—the faintest scuff of a shoe against the pavement. My heart pounds as I glance behind me, but the alley is empty. The shadows look deeper now, darker, like they’re hiding something just out of sight.

I force myself to move, my steps faster, more purposeful. My pulse pounds in my ears, drowning out everything else. I need to get back to Nina or Ryu. But as I reach the end of the alley, a figure suddenly blocks my path.

He’s tall, dressed in dark clothing that blends seamlessly with the night. An *oni* mask obscures his face, but his posture is predatory, radiating menace. My breath catches: for a split second, I'm *sure* that this is Takeshi, playing a seriously fucked-up game with me.

Except then the masked man speaks.

“*Mine*.”

It is *absolutely* not Takeshi’s voice.

Holy fuck.

I spin on my heel, bolting back the way I came. The footsteps follow, heavy and unrelenting, as my skin ripples with panic. My lungs burn as I sprint through the labyrinthine alleys, the city blurring around me. But the figure is too fast, and I can feel him gaining on me.

I round a corner, nearly colliding with a stack of crates, but I don’t stop. I can’t. My mind races, searching for a way out, a safe place to hide. Sugita, the restaurant where Nina, Ryu, and a dozen Ishida-kai guards are all waiting for me—and probably wonder what’s taking me so long in the bathroom—isn’t far. But right now, it feels like miles away.

The footsteps grow louder, closer, and I know I’m running out of time. I dart into a side alley, my chest heaving with exertion.

It’s a dead end.

I whirl, my back pressed against the cold, damp wall. The figure appears at the mouth of the alley, a dark silhouette against the faint glow of the streetlights. He doesn’t speak or make a sound, but his intent is clear.

I reach into my bag, fingers closing around the handle of the small knife I always carry. I pull it out, my hand shaky as I hold it in front of me. The figure hesitates, his head tilted slightly as if assessing me. The air between us is charged, a silent standoff that stretches impossibly long.

Then he lunges.

I react instinctively, slashing with the blade. He dodges quickly and easily and I swing again, forcing him back. He hisses in pain, and my eyes fly to

the tear in the front of his shirt, showing a brief flash of pale skin and red blood.

I cut him.

I don’t dwell on my victory. I take the opportunity to dart past him, my legs trembling but determined as I make a break for it.

The streets flash past as I run, fear driving me forward. I don’t stop until I reach the entrance to Sugita, my breath ragged and my heart threatening to burst out of my chest. My father’s men standing guard outside react instantly when they take in my disheveled appearance.

“Inside,” I sign, my hands shaking. “Now.”

They nod, ushering me into the restaurant. I don’t stop until I’m safely inside the private dining room, Nina and Ryu springing from their chairs in shock. My entire body is trembling, the adrenaline refusing to subside.

Nina grabs me in a tight, panicked embrace. “What the hell happened?!” she blurts.

I sign quickly, jerkily. “Followed. Tried to grab me.”

Ryu’s jaw tightens. But he seems to instantly jump over the questions I’m sure he has about where I was, what I was doing, and why I lied about going to the bathroom. “Did you see who it was?”

I shake my head, still trembling. “Had a mask. I don’t know who he was. I cut him, though."

Ryu nods quickly before he goes to the door, yanks it open, and barks for his men. Four of them step in, nodding grimly when he tells them to surround the building, check every inch of the restaurant, and call in an armed security detail to get us back to Papa’s house.

Nina’s grip on my shoulders tightens. “We’ll figure out who it was. You're safe now.”

Her words do little to calm the storm inside me. My mind races, piecing together fragments of the encounter. One name keeps surfacing, unbidden and unwelcome.

Takeshi.

Ridiculous, I tell myself. That *clearly* wasn't him.

Right?

And yet the doubt lingers.

Later, in the calm sanctuary of my room, I try to collect myself. The fear has dulled, morphing into a gnawing unease. I move to my dresser, grabbing for my phone charger. When I do, I knock over a framed picture of Papa, Nina, and me from years ago.

Shit.

It hits the floor with a sharp crack of shattering glass. I wince as I crouch down, carefully trying to pick the photo out of the mess without scratching it. As the cracked back of the frame shifts, something nestled in the mess catches my eye: a small, sleek device, barely larger than a coin. My heart stutters as I pick it up, turning it over in my hand.

What the hell?

I find Ryu pacing the small room he's co-opted as his personal command center in Papa's house. He's still got men combing Tokyo, seeing if anyone knows anything about what happened to me earlier. He looks up, pulling the phone away from his ear when I step in and close the door.

"I have to ask you something. Before I do," I sign, "I need you to promise you won't overreact."

He frowns. "I'm not sure I can do that, Katarina-san."

I give him a beseeching look. "Please, Ryu. Honestly, I need you not to react at all. I just need the information."

Slowly, he nods dubiously. "Okay. What do you need?"

I hold out my hand, the silver coin-shaped device with the small wire sitting in my palm.

Ryu plucks it from my hand, frowning.

“What is this?” I sign.

His scowl deepens.

“Listening device.” His eyes snap to mine. “Where did you find it?”

All the air rushes out of the room at once and my vision blurs as the implications hit me like a freight train.

Someone’s been *listening* to me.

No. Not “someone”.

Takeshi.

“I need to know where you found this,” Ryu growls. “This is serious.”

I shake my head. “The man who was following me tonight… It fell out of his coat pocket,” I lie. “Is there any way of finding out where it came from? Or who it belongs to?”

“Actually, yes,” he mutters. “Look.” He points to lettering on the back side of the device. “That’s Cyrillic. This is Russian-made.” His eyes drag back to me. “Most people in this city using bugging devices like this would buy either Japanese or Korean. The Russian ones tend to be a little more high end, and a *lot* more expensive.” His face darkens. “There are only two, maybe three Yakuza families in Tokyo who use Russian tech.” He frowns. “Actually, probably just two.”

“Who?” I motion slowly. I’m sure I know the answer, I’m just dreading hearing it.

“Well, us,” he grunts, eyeing the bug. “And…the Mori-kai.”

That motherfucker.

The man in the alley tonight might not have been Takeshi. But the high-end listening device hidden in my fucking *bedroom*?

Definitely him.

Whatever connection I thought we were developing, whatever fragile understanding had begun to form, it’s shattered now.

“Katarina—”

“Remember what I said,” I sign firmly. “Please don't react.”

“Yes, but—”

“That’s an order.”

He eyes me coolly for a second before his loyalty kicks in. I *hate* myself for playing that card.

“Understood, Katarina-sama,” he growls.

“Thank you, Ryu,” I sign, putting my hand on his arm and squeezing. “Really. Thank you.”

As I head back to my room, the fury inside surges.

Takeshi.

He’s a psychopath. A manipulator. I was crazy to think I could trust him, even for a second.

I grab my phone, typing out a message to Nina. “We need to talk tomorrow. There’s something I have to handle.”

Whatever game Takeshi thinks he’s playing, I’m going to be the one who wins.

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KATARINA

OKITA HAS the car waiting in front of the house. I smile widely as he opens the back door for me.

“How’s your father, Okita?”

He bows very low. “Recovering nicely, thank you, Katarina-sama.”

I’ve had other chauffeurs and other personal guards. Okita acts as both these days, and has done since I was sixteen. The others, both drivers and guards, were always either too stiff or *way* too familiar. There was one, Jason, who kept bringing me flowers every time he’d come pick me up. One time, he even brought me *lingerie*.

I was fourteen.

I never saw him again, and although I have no idea what happened to him, I *do* remember Papa being in an especially good mood the night after I told him about the mortifying lingerie incident. He had that glint in his eye he gets when he…*fixes problems*.

Okita is good people. He even knuckled down and learned some basic sign language within three weeks of becoming my driver. Major brownie points. I'm happy to hear his dad is doing well: he just had an operation for a prostate issue.

“And truly, thank you for the time off last month. I know he appreciated having me around.”

“Of course, Okita,” I sign. “You never even have to ask, it’s a given: family is always first.”

He smiles back, helping me into the back seat.

“Where are we headed today, Ms. Ishida?”

“Katagiri-kai headquarters. I’m sitting down with Baku Katagiri.”

Just one more ally to meet with and make sure we’re all on the same page concerning my husband—i.e., the page where no one talks to or even acknowledges him, because he’s a sneaky little fucking *spy*.

The tinted windows shield me from the outside world as Okita heads down the driveway toward the front gates. The guards there nod, and the gates slide open to let us drive through.

Instantly, the roar of an engine pierces the air and a dark blur cuts across the road in front of us. Okira swears, slamming on the brakes as the black motorcycle screeches to a halt directly in front of the car.

The tall, built man swings off the bike, his boots hitting the pavement with deliberate force. He yanks off his helmet, revealing wild eyes and sharp features.

Fucking *Takeshi*.

The guards are on him in seconds, hands hovering over their weapons. Okita steps out of the car, his expression grim. “Sir!” he growls. “You need to move—”

I roll down the window just enough to stick out my hand and slap the side of the car. “It’s fine, Okita,” I sign sharply and precisely. “I can handle this.”

The guards hesitate, exchanging glances, but then step back at my command. I push the door open and step out, my face impassive despite the chaos Takeshi is clearly trying to stir.

He’s scowling at me as I walk the rest of the way down the driveway and come to a stop right in front of him, my expression utterly neutral.

“Can I help you?” I sign, my hands moving with deliberate flair.

“You know exactly what this is about,” Takeshi growls, his voice low and rough. “You’re boxing me out.”

I cock an eyebrow. “I have no idea what you’re talking about,” I reply, my movements crisp and dismissive.

“My code's stopped working. I can’t get into the compound.”

“New security protocol,” I toss back. “You don’t live here, remember?”

His nostrils flare, and he takes a step closer. “You’ve got all the captains and Ishida-kai allies shutting up the second I walk into a room.”

“Yes, because they’re Ishida-kai captains and allies,” I retort. “Not yours.”

His voice drops, rumbling darkly. “I am your *husband*.”

“Yes—why is that, by the way?” I sign back, the fire in me stoked by his audacity.

He glares at me, the tension in his body palpable. “It’s a *truce*.”

“And?” I press, stepping closer.

“It helps you retain power,” he growls, his voice tight and frustrated.

“But what about you, Tak?” I counter, my hands trembling slightly as I shape the words. “What do you get out of this?”

He’s silent as he stares at me, his eyes dark and unreadable.

“You can't possibly claim it's out of the goodness of your heart,” I add, my face twisted bitterly. “Don’t even try to say you’re doing this for me. You don’t give a shit about me. I’m just an angle for you.”

His eyes flash as he comes closer, his presence suffocating. “Is that what you think?” he snarls. “You think I’d defy both your psycho father and my own family, and put the entire peace in jeopardy, *for no reason*?”

I hold his gaze, unblinking. Then I hurl the listening device at him. It hits his chest before clattering to the ground.

“For my own protection, I suppose?” I motion furiously, my hands shaking with rage.

He stares at the device for a moment before lifting his gaze to mine. “Yes,” he says firmly.

“Liar,” I retort.

“You don’t get to freeze me out, Katarina,” he growls, his voice a low snarl. “Not after everything.”

“You mean after the lies?” I fire back, my hands moving sharply. “The manipulation? The games?”

“You call this a game?” he demands, his face mere inches from mine. “You think I’m *playing* with you?”

“What would you call it?” My body is trembling with anger. “And I suppose that's why you had me chased?” The accusation leaves my hands before I can stop myself.

He freezes, his eyes widening.

“*What*?!” he barks.

I glare at him, my hands trembling as I recount the night's events, fear and anger in my eyes as I gesture.

“Someone followed me, Takeshi. Chased me through the streets. I barely got away.”

His face goes livid: his jaw clenches so tightly I can see the muscles working.

“All the more reason for me to watch over you,” he snarls.

“You mean spy,” I correct him. “All the more reason for you to spy on me.”

He steps oppressively close.

“Call it what you like. You’re mine to watch,” he growls, his low voice sending an involuntary shiver down my spine.

“I am not yours,” I motion fiercely, my breath coming in short, ragged bursts as I back away.

“Oh, princess,” he murmurs, his voice dripping with dark amusement, “you’re so much more mine than you care to admit.”

My breath catches. For a moment, he says nothing, his gaze unrelenting and intense. Then, slowly, his brow furrows.

“Who the fuck chased you?” he demands sharply.

I hesitate, my anger ebbing slightly as the memory washes over me. “I don’t know,” I finally admit. “Nobody does.”

His eyes flash dangerously. “All the more reason not to shut me out,” he growls, his hands gripping my arms tightly.

“Why?” I sign bitterly. “You’re going to protect me from them?”

“*Yes*,” he snarls. He cups my face, his touch rough but grounding. “Like it or not, princess, I’m your *husband*. You’re my *wife*. And I won’t let *anyone* fucking touch *my wife*.”

Before I can respond, he wraps his hand around the back of my neck and slams his mouth to mine, the fierce, consuming kiss leaving neither room for argument nor room for thought.

And God help me, I *melt* into it.

When he finally pulls back, leaving me breathless and my lips swollen, he smiles darkly.

“Oh, and one more thing,” he growls, not letting go. “Enough of this ‘I don’t live here’ shit.” His eyes narrow as his lips curl darkly. “I’m moving in with you.”

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KATARINA

THE MOMENT Takeshi moves into the Ishida house—which he does that night—the air shifts. I begrudgingly arrange a room for him at the far end of the house, near the guest quarters. It's pristine, impersonal, and far more space than he deserves.

But when I walk into my own room that evening he's already installed himself, his motorcycle jacket draped over the back of my chair, his bag casually tossed in the corner.

A low purring sound rips my attention to the far side of the room, where my fearsome tiger protector is sprawled on the floor, happily gnawing on a massive, bloody piece of steak.

You traitorous little shit, I think venomously as I glare at Furrcules. Then I rip my gaze to Takeshi.

"This isn't your room," I sign sharply.

He smirks, stepping to me with *infuriating* ease. "It is now."

"No, it's—"

Before I can finish my protest, his hands are on me, his mouth crushing mine. The kiss is bold, demanding, and utterly confounding. I'm torn between wanting to shove him away and yearning to sink into the unexpected warmth of his touch.

It's new, this tenderness mixed with his unrelenting dominance.

Confusing, frustrating…and not *entirely* unwelcome.

“Husband,” he growls as he pulls back, pointing to his chest. “*Wife*,” he continues, turning his hand and pressing his fingertip against my chest, between my breasts. “Ergo—this is *our* room.”

Goddammit.

The next few weeks blur together as I divide my time between the Ishida-kai compound and the hospital where Papa’s continuing to receive treatment. The once-unstoppable “*Yuki no Akuma”* or Snow Demon is now confined to bed rest, his pale skin a painful reminder to me of his mortality.

“You’re doing well, *Koshka*,” he tells me during one of our morning meetings in his hospital room. He’s propped up by a mountain of pillows, his eyes sharper than one would expect for someone so weakened. “You’re officially in charge now, I hope you realize that. You have their respect.”

“Respect is fragile," I sign back, my movements measured and deliberate. "They only follow because they have no choice.”

He smirks, a shadow of his former self. “Incorrect. They follow because they know you’ll gut them if they don’t.”

The corner of my mouth twitches up, but it doesn’t quite become a smile. It feels like in praising me, Papa is preparing me for something I’m not ready to face.

I don't dwell on the matter, though. My focus is razor-sharp, my resolve unyielding —and yet, somewhere in the recesses of my mind, Takeshi lingers like an unwelcome shadow I can’t shake.

* * *

Oh FUCK…

I moan deep in my throat, writhing in the sheets as the orgasm floods through me. My back arches from the bed, my legs wrapping tightly around Takeshi’s muscled hips as he groans, driving his cock deep.

My eyes roll back, another wave of pleasure crashing over me as his one hand tightens around my neck, the other gripping my hip hard enough to leave bruises as he grinds into me. With a choked roar, his muscles clench and ripple, his cock swelling inside me, his cum filling me.

Now *that* is a wakeup I could get used to. As in, I literally woke up with his cock inside me. Which, for some people, might blur the lines surrounding consent.

But my lines were blurred long before he got his hands on me.

I've found myself wondering recently more and more about why I'm so comfortable with blurred lines when it comes to him. Why I crave the dark pleasure he can offer me.

I think partly it's that there's something about Takeshi that makes surrender feel more like defiance than weakness—like, giving in to him is its own form of rebellion. Does that make any sense?

Partly it's because I tell myself I trust him not to truly hurt me…though that trust is tenuous at best.

And maybe it's because, with him, it's the first time I don't have to be in control. I can let go, knowing he'll catch me.

Forcefully and brutally, but he'll catch me.

It's fucked up, and I don't quite understand it, but I've stopped pretending I don't crave it.

I smile contentedly, luxuriating in the afterglow of my orgasm as he slowly pulls his thick cock from my tight pussy. I shiver as he slides free, his cum dripping out of me in a way that makes me blush but is also electrifying.

Before I can reach for a tissue, he's sliding down my body, grabbing my thighs and pushing them wide apart. He dives between my legs, his eyes locked on mine as he dips his mouth…

Oh sweet fucking hell…

His tongue drags over my tender lips, nibbling, licking, sucking. He doesn't seem to care that he's just emptied what feels like a pint of cum inside me.

In fact, I realize as his tongue dances over me that he's actively licking it up, and…

Holy hell…

Pushing it back in with his tongue.

Fuck me, *why* is that so fucking hot?

I jerk and writhe as he devours me, using his tongue and fingers to push his cum back into my pussy before wrapping his lips around my clit and starting to suck.

It's too much.

My body spasms as another orgasm rips through me. He finally releases his hold and I collapse onto the bed, shuddering and trying to find my breath.

"*Now*," he growls as he slides up and collapses onto the pillows next to me, his lean, muscled body rippling. "Now, you can take a break."

"Tyrant," I sign, grinning as I roll over to stare at him.

God, he's attractive. Like, outrageously, unfairly so.

"Want a camera to take a picture? It'll last longer."

I blush, rolling away.

"Don't let it go to your head, dick," I sign, arching my eyebrows flirtatiously as I slip out of bed and pad to the bathroom, closing the door behind me.

I stop when I see my own reflection. I look like…well, like I just got fucked, hard.

But I also look happy. Truly, weirdly, *happy*.

How about that.

I pee, brush my teeth, and then go to take my morning birth control pill.

But when I pick up the foil blister pack, something feels off.

I frown as I rub my thumb across the back of it, leaning closer to inspect the pills. They’re all there, except, something *literally* feels off…maybe the foil…?

Just then, my thumb pokes right through the backing into one of the blister pockets…and instantly crumbles the pill inside.

…None of this has *ever* happened before.

The foil is always a major pain in the ass to poke through. And the pills themselves are rock-hard little tic-tacs, not crumbly, powdery things.I scowl as I touch the crushed up pill and bring my finger to my lips, tasting.

What the *fuck*?

Sugar. The pill is *sugar*. I mean, yes, there are placebos in the pack, but I've never noticed them to be sweet, and they're always at the end of the pack anyway.

My hands shake as I easily pop open another blister pocket and put that pill in my mouth. It dissolves quickly, leaving a sweet aftertaste on my tongue.

They’re *all* sugar pills.

Oh my God.

Oh. My. Fucking. GOD.

I storm back into the bedroom, the pack clutched tightly in my hand. Takeshi is still sprawled out on the bed, one arm flung over his face as he sleeps.

I don’t bother to wake him gently. I grab my glass of water from the nightstand and splash the contents on his face and chest, instantly jolting him back to consciousness.

“What the fuck is this?” I sign furiously, my movements tense as I toss the pack at him.

I’m waiting for a hurried excuse and some bullshit. Instead, he just looks up at me, an infuriating smirk on his lips.

“Morning, princess,” he drawls, voice still rough with sleep.

“Explain this. *Now*,” I sign viciously, my hands moving so quickly I’m surprised he can follow.

He picks up the blister pack, turning it over lazily as if it’s nothing. “Looks like birth control pills, maybe?”

“Don’t play dumb,” I motion. “You tampered with them.”

He sits up slowly, his smirk never fading. “Yes. I did.”

The admission is so casual and brazen that I almost can’t believe it. My hands tremble as I sign furiously. “What the fuck was your plan? Knock me up and take over via an heir? What is this, ancient Rome?!”

He laughs, the sound dark and low, and it grates on my already frayed nerves. “You’re overreacting.”

“Overreacting.” My movements are sharp enough to cut. “You’re insane.”

“And *you’re* scared,” he counters, suddenly serious. “Scared of what it means to have someone like me in your life. You’re as scared of motherhood, it would appear, as you are of trusting me.”

The accusation hits too close to home: I falter for a moment before recovering. “And I wonder what the common thread there is,” I throw at him bitterly.

His expression hardens. For a moment, neither of us speaks.

“You think I’m plotting against you?” he finally mutters, low and dangerous.

“Aren’t you?” I challenge. “You’re always scheming, always manipulating. Why should this be any different?”

He stands abruptly, the pack of pills still in his hand as he strides to me, looming.

“*I’m not your enemy*,” he says, his voice a rough whisper. “You just can’t see that yet.”

I laugh bitterly. “Sure have a funny way of showing it.”

His hand reaches out, cupping my jaw roughly but not painfully. “You don’t trust me? Fine—but don’t think for a second that I’ll let you push me away.”

I slap at his hand, my chest heaving with the effort to contain my rage. “Get out,” I sign, my movements slow and deliberate. “Now.”

His eyes hold mine, dark and unyielding. For a moment, I think he’ll argue and push back. But then he steps away, tossing the pack of pills onto the bed.

“This isn’t over,” he murmurs before turning and walking out of the room.

The door clicks shut behind him, leaving me with just the sound of my ragged breathing and the memory of his words. My hands tremble as I pick up the package of pills, staring at it like it's a bomb before I suddenly drop it to the floor.

He’s right. This isn’t over.

And that scares the hell out me.

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TAKESHI

KATARINA *THINKS* she has me figured out—knows every move I'll make before I make it, every angle I'll try.

That's the problem with someone who's used to being the smartest person in the room—even though, in her case, Katarina usually truly *is*. The smartest, I mean.

That kind of person always thinks they've accounted for everything. But they never account for *me*.

I sit in the darkened corner of the study I've claimed as mine since moving into the Ishida compound, idly spinning a glass of whiskey. The amber liquid catches the faint light, swirling like smoke against the cut crystal. My thoughts are less elegant.

I exhale slowly through my lips and turn to glance at my newfound ally here in the Ishida house. Currently, that new ally is happily ignoring me while he devours yet another obscenely expensive cut of Matsusaka wagyu steak.

Why, yes, I *have* been buying Katarina's questionable choice in pet's love with billionaire-level luxury meat. Not to be an asshole or to try and steal away something she loves.

…Because it's a fucking *tiger*, and yes, I'd like it to think of me as a *provider* of yummy food when it looks at me, not a fucking source of it.

I watch as Furrcules finishes the outrageously priced steak I just gave him and then looks up at me hopefully.

“You understand that your ancestors were perfectly content with village goats and carrion, right?”

Furrcules makes a meowling sound and pads over to rub his nose against my leg.

“Couldn’t have a thing for fast food burgers, huh?” I sigh. “Not hotdogs? Had to be hundred-dollar an ounce steak?”

My new tiger friend butts my leg again with his head and then paws at my shoe.

“Bougie little bitch,” I smirk, reaching down to scratch under his chin. Furrcules drops his hind quarters and then sinks to the floor, apparently placated by head scritches for the time being.

I exhale again as my brows knit.

Replacing Katarina’s pills was…a choice. Maybe not a *good* one. But—

I glare into my glass.

Okay. Fine. It was a bad choice.

I know that. Somewhere deep down in the black pit where my morals used to be, there’s a faint, nagging whisper that what I did was wrong. But that’s the thing about me—I’m fully capable of recognizing my wrongs without an ounce of regret. And when it comes to the pills, if I’m being honest, I *don’t* regret it. Not for a second.

It’s not what she thinks. Yes, I fucked with her birth control pills in the hopes she might end up pregnant. But not for the reason she believes.

Katarina sees betrayal lurking in every shadow, a conspiracy behind every move I make. And while I’d love to claim it’s because she’s paranoid, she’s…not entirely wrong.

The problem is that I have *two* motives, and they’re at war with each other. One of those motives just threw water in my face. The other?

The other is lying in a hospital bed.

I set the glass down and push to my feet, the leather of my chair creaking in protest. Time to pay a visit to *Yuki no Akuma*.

AKA, my father-in-law.

* * *

THE HOSPITAL IS QUIET, the halls dimly lit as day edges toward evening. Kolya's private suite is on the top floor. The guards outside his door eye me warily as I approach. But thankfully, the dust-up with Katarina this morning hasn't resulted in her telling everyone to give me the cold shoulder again.

…Not *yet*, at least.

The guards still exchange uncertain glances, though. I exhale sharply.

"In case it's slipped your fucking minds," I say. "Kolya-sama and I are now *family*."

I resist the urge to add in a line about doing my bit to make him a grandfather.

Restraint, self. We've established that tampering with your wife's birth control without her knowledge or consent is…bad. Yes?

My eyes narrow on them. "*Move*," I growl.

They glance at each other again, but then step aside, allowing me entry. The door clicks shut behind me.

Kolya looks tired, propped up in his hospital bed. But his eyes are as sharp as ever as they narrow on me.

"Takeshi," he says, his voice rough but steady. "To what do I owe this unexpected pleasure?"

"We've gone so long without some quality son-in-law/father-in-law bonding. I thought we could rectify that."

Kolya gives me a slightly annoyed look.

“Are you actually used to your charm and bullshit working on people?”

“Perhaps ask your daughter.”

Kolya’s jaw tightens, his eyes lancing into mine. But he doesn’t take the bait.

“What do you want, Takeshi.”

I step closer, the faint smile on my lips cool and calculated. “In all seriousness, I thought it was time we had a chat.”

“A chat,” he repeats, his tone dark with suspicion. “About what.”

I drag a chair closer to his bedside, the scrape of the legs against the floor deliberately slow, grating. I settle in, leaning back as if I have all the time in the world.

“I see right through you, you know,” Kolya says before I can speak. “Do you think for a single solitary second that I allowed you to marry my daughter and didn’t see you scheming a mile away?”

I chuckle darkly. “Scheming is such an ugly word. I prefer ‘strategizing’.”

His lips curl into a snarl as he studies me with his piercing eyes, his jaw tightening. “I have a hundred eyes on you at any given moment, Takeshi. I see *everything*.”

“I doubt that,” I reply smoothly. “Or you’d be out of that bed trying to strangle me.”

Kolya’s fingers twitch against the blanket. “Provoking me isn’t going to work. Now, are we going to dance all evening, or are you planning to tell me why you’re really here?”

Slowly, I lean forward a little. “I wanted to ask you about Akira Ohno.”

There’s a flicker of something in his eyes. A slight tick of his jaw. But he shakes his head.

“I’m unfamiliar with the name,” he says evenly. “But I assume you are?”

I let the silence stretch out. “Akira was a friend of mine,” I finally say. “Back when I was young. He taught me a lot about myself...cars… women…about channeling certain *impulses*.”

Kolya’s expression doesn’t waver, but the tension in the room winds tighter. “What does this have to do with me?”

“He disappeared,” I continue, my tone casual but measured. “Shortly after returning to Tokyo. I’ve heard he might have had dealings with the Ishida-kai.”

Kolya’s eyes flash. “And you think I had something to do with it?”

“Did you?” I counter.

He doesn’t answer immediately. Finally he exhales, his gaze steady, his voice quiet. “If you’re here to dig up ghosts, Takeshi, I suggest you tread carefully. Some things are better left buried.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” I reply, rising to my feet. “Thank you for your time.”

“I didn’t mean that as a threat, you know.”

I turn back at his words, eying him as he steeples his hands in his lap.

“Call it well-intentioned advice,” he adds.

“Well, thank you again.”

Kolya doesn’t respond, his gaze following me as I make my way to the door. Just as I reach for the handle, his voice stops me.

“Are you keeping her safe?” he growls, his tone deadly.

I glance over my shoulder, my gaze dark and unyielding.

“Katarina’s tough, and strong, and brave," he murmurs. "But she’s still…” He looks away, gritting his teeth. “She means the world to me, Takeshi,” he continues, turning back to me. “So—”

“Whether or not I’ll protect your daughter is the last thing you ever have to worry about,” I reply quietly. “I’d kill for her, Kolya-sama.”

He nods. “I appreciate it.”

“You could always thank me by helping me dig up some ghosts.”

He smiles wryly, shaking his head. “All I can do is caution you, as a man who’s dug up enough ghosts in his day, to *let it be*.” His eyes lock with mine. “Nothing good ever comes from raising the dead, Takeshi.”

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26

KATARINA

THE CLATTER of my keyboard fills the otherwise quiet study. Reports, files, calendars, meeting schedules… They all blur together, but I force myself to focus.

I have to.

Frankly, this is all piling up faster than I expected it to. Papa being in and out of the hospital, the ever-evolving political landscape of the Yakuza in Tokyo, the constant need to push our organization to the next level…taken together, it's a lot.

But I can do this.

…Probably.

I'm exhaling distractedly when the door to Papa's office, where I've set up operations, swings open.

I don't need to look up to know who it is. For a start, there's only one person in the *world* who would walk into Kolya Ishida's home office uninvited and without announcing himself, even if the man himself wasn't here. And also, the air shifts in a very particular way whenever Takeshi steps into a room.

"You've been avoiding me," he says, his voice edged with challenge.

I finally glance up at him, raising an eyebrow.

“Really,” I sign dryly. “I hadn’t noticed.”

He smirks. Infuriatingly.

“Although if I have, could it have something to do with you *fucking with my birth control*?” My hands move furiously as I glare at him.

“That may have had something to do with it, yes,” he throws back nonchalantly.

I roll my eyes. “I really don’t have time for your bullshit just now, Takeshi.”

“I…” He clears his throat awkwardly, his brow furrowing before he finally gets it out. “I *apologize* for my…less-than-appropriate actions.”

That posh British accent mixed with the rough, bad-boy charm gives him a totally unfair advantage.

Infuriatingly unfair.

“Less than appropriate,” I motion, unsmiling. “That’s…one way of putting it.”

He coughs again, shoving his fingers through his hair.

“In any case, come outside,” he says, as casually as if he were inviting me to tea.

I sit back in my chair, crossing my arms. “Is that your way of apologizing?” I sign deliberately.

He smirks. “Apologizing’s not my style, princess. I’ll let you decide if this makes up for it, though.”

My curiosity wins, and I follow him through the house and out the front door. Then I see them—two sleek black Yamaha racing bikes, gleaming in the neon light of the city around us.

“We’ll practice in the driveway first. Or, if you want, you can just ride with me.”

Takeshi picks up a helmet, tossing it to me smugly. That smugness falters when I catch the helmet easily, tossing him a look.

Oh, this should be fun.

I stride over to the closest bike, swing my leg over it with practiced ease, and fire up the engine. The roar has pure adrenaline thrumming through my bones as I rev it confidently, pulling the helmet on, fastening it deftly, and flicking the visor up to look at him.

“Well?” I sign.

Takeshi’s smug grin falters for a split second, replaced with a look of grudging admiration. “Well, well,” he mutters, his voice tinged with surprise.

“Just try to keep up,” I motion.

* * *

OKAY, I *may* have oversold my abilities a little.

In the end, I'm the one who struggles to keep up—but only because I want to actually survive the evening, unlike Takeshi, whose riding style suggests he has a fucking *death wish* when he’s on the back of a bike.

The streets of Tokyo blur into streaks of neon as we weave through the city. When he’s not being recklessly suicidal, Takeshi rides with a precision that borders on arrogance, zigzagging through traffic like the road belongs to him.

I follow as best as I can, my hands tight on the handlebars as I follow behind him, my heart pounding in my chest. The city roars past, my senses tuned to the max as I push myself to the limit just to keep him in sight.

Fuck me, is it exhilarating— if terrifying.

Finally he slows, pulling up outside a small, nondescript bar tucked into an alley. I roll my eyes when I see the ridiculously on-the-nose name of the bar, flickering in faint neon kanji lettering above the door.

Kaiju.

Monster bar.

Of *course*.

Takeshi kills the engine and glances over his shoulder at me as I do the same.

“Drink?” he asks casually, as if we’re two normal people out for a night on the town.

I swing off my bike, removing my helmet. “Why not,” I sign, following him inside.

The bar is dimly lit, the scent of smoke and alcohol hanging in the air. It’s quiet, with only a handful of patrons scattered around the room. Takeshi orders for both of us, sliding a glass of whiskey in front of me after leading us to a corner table.

“Why motorcycles?” I sign, taking a sip. The burn is sharp, but it’s a welcome distraction from his overwhelming presence.

“Freedom,” he says, his eyes locked on mine. “There’s nothing like it—just you, the machine, and the road.”

“And where’d you learn to ride like that?”

Takeshi leans back in his chair, his glass balanced between his fingers, the whiskey catching the dim light.

“Akira,” he says quietly.

I stiffen, my fingers tightening around my own glass. I remember how he spoke of Akira before, and the implication that my father had something to do with his disappearance.

“Who was he to you?” I sign, curious.

Takeshi looks away across the quiet, low-lit bar.

“Part mentor. Part friend. A teacher, I guess.” He turns his glass on the table. “When I was a teenager, I was…sort of a terror.”

“Unbelievable,” I sign, a sarcastic look of surprise on my face.

Takeshi grins. “Honestly, whatever you’re imagining, the reality was five times worse. I was running with the wrong crowd. I also didn’t know what to do with the…” He shakes his head. “With the thoughts I have inside me, sometimes.”

His darkness. The psychotic tendencies I’ve witnessed first-hand.

His kaiju.

“Anyway, my mom met this guy, Akira Ohno, through her various social circles. He was Japanese, had money and status like our family, and I guess she figured he’d be a good mentor for me.” He shrugs. “I fought it at first, because of course I did. But pretty soon, he was like the cool uncle I never had. He taught me about engines, about finding the balance between chaos and precision.” His dark eyes fly to mine, and I can see the weight of unspoken words there.

He taught Takeshi how to control his monster.

“Do you still think my father was responsible?” I sign sharply.

He holds my gaze for a long moment. Then he smirks. “I think, for tonight at least, I’m having too much fun to go digging up ghosts, princess.”

* * *

BACK ON THE BIKES, the streets feel different. Or maybe I'm what feels different. I’ve just had my first real date in my entire life.

With my husband.

Talk about ass backward.

The hum of the city has an edge to it, like the shadows are watching. Takeshi rides ahead, less maniacally now, his form silhouetted against the neon glow. I follow closely, the thrill of the ride rushing through me.

It happens very quickly.

I spot movement in my peripheral vision—a dark shape closing in. Before I can react, a motorcycle roars up beside me, the rider clad in black and wearing a helmet shaped like a menacing *oni* demon mask. The figure swerves toward me, forcing me closer to the edge of the road, making my heart leap into my throat.

My hands sign desperately in the air toward Takeshi ahead of me. But he can't see me. The rider next to me veers close again, and my pulse jangles when he raises a hand and points right at me.

What the fuck.

In a panic, I start to hammer the horn, blasting it over and over.

The other rider careens in again. His arm lifts, and horror washes over me as I realize he's *reaching* for me.

Terror explodes through my system as I hit the horn again and again and ram my bike into a higher gear, shooting forward and away from the masked rider, recklessly lurching into oncoming traffic before I cut back into the proper lane, getting closer to Takeshi. I pound the horn again, and this time, his head jerks to the side when he hears me.

I wave a hand frantically. Just as I do, the other rider roars up again, insanely close to me, sending my heart into my throat.

Wordlessly, Takeshi drops back, gunning his engine, surging toward the other rider. The man roars forward, dodging Takeshi easily. I watch in terror in my rear view mirror as Takeshi races into oncoming traffic, narrowly missing a taxi before cutting back into the correct lane.

Suddenly, my bike jams to the side, my balance wobbling as I almost lose control of the front wheel.

Holy *fuck.*

The unknown rider just *rammed me*.

He veers toward me again, reaching for me with a gloved hand. Just as he gets close, his bike jerks, slamming sideways into me.

A silent scream rips from my throat as my front wheel wobbles wildly. The bike veers left, then right, tipping dangerously as it prepares to flip. I can feel gravity getting ready to drag me down to the road and rip me to pieces.

Suddenly, an arm snakes around my waist and a strong hand grasps my riding jacket, yanking me off my bike just as it completely spirals out and goes crashing into the back of a parked van with a smash of metal and glass.

My heart skips as a familiar grip grabs me and hauls me onto the back of his bike, my arms around his midsection.

Takeshi.

I can barely breathe or think as he guns the engine, roaring off down the neon-lit street as I cling to him for dear life.

But the masked rider doesn't let up. He's still on our tail, his bike weaving expertly as he gains on us. Takeshi grips the handlebars tightly, his body tense as he pushes his machine to the limit.

"Hang on!" he yells over the wind ripping past my ears.

The entire world tilts as Takeshi turns sharply, tires skidding on the wet pavement. I cling to him, my heart pounding so loud I can barely hear the roar of the engines.

What happens next is a blur. The pursuer rams into us, the impact sending our bike skidding out of control. Takeshi twists the handlebars expertly, letting us hit the street at an angle that sends us sliding across the pavement instead of tumbling.

Still, all I know is pure fear as we hit—hard. The bike skids out, Takeshi grabbing me and kicking us away from the metal as it scrapes across the pavement. His arms encircle me, both of us groaning as we tumble together, rolling over and over until we end up crashing into a pile of garbage bags next to a dumpster.

Holy fuck.

Pain explodes through my body, the air knocked from my lungs. An engine backfires as the other bike roars over, pulling up nearby.

The rider dismounts and starts to stalk to where we're both slumped on the ground. The *oni* mask is even more terrifying up close, its grotesque features twisted into a permanent snarl. Suddenly, Takeshi is lurching to his feet and pushing in front of me. He reaches behind him and pulls a blade out of the back of his jeans, brandishing the knife in a fighter's stance.

The man in the *oni* mask pauses for a second as time stops. Then he reaches into his own jacket, and pulls out a short katana.

Oh God.

One second, the two men are just standing and facing each other. The next, they're colliding.

Takeshi grunts as he slams into the masked man. They're basically the same size, and equally fast. I claw to my feet, panic and fear exploding through me as the man tries to jam the katana into Takeshi's stomach. Takeshi blocks it, taking a slash to his arm before he stabs his own blade into the other guy's thigh, eliciting a roar of pain.

Quickly, the fight shifts as the masked rider rams into Takeshi with his shoulder, knocking him backward and off his feet. My husband scrambles to grab the knife he's just dropped, and then I watch in horror as the other man kicks it away and storms over.

He looms over Takeshi, brandishing his katana as my world slows to a frozen stop.

No…

Suddenly, it all shifts again. Gunfire rings out, shattering the frozen moment. The man in the *oni* mask ducks as bullets spray the brick wall behind him.

"KATARINA! GET DOWN!"

It's *Ryu*, leaning over the hood of his car, gun trained on the man with the katana. He fires off another few shots, sending the masked attacker

scurrying back to his bike and jumping on before he turns to level a blank, emotionless stare at me. Then the bike roars to life and screams off down the road.

Takeshi is halfway to his feet as Ryu rushes over, but then he collapses again to his knees, his breathing labored. I scramble over and grab him, easing him to the ground as he pulls his helmet off with a wince, his face tight with agony.

“Are you okay?!” I sign with shaky hands.

His expression is strained but defiant. “I'm fine,” he grits out, his hand coming up to touch his side gingerly.

Oh shit.

The white t-shirt under his riding jacket is slowly turning red.

“What the fuck was that!” Ryu hisses as he runs over and drops down next to where I’m crouched with Takeshi.

“Road rage,” Takeshi grunts.

Ryu pulls back Takeshi’s jacket, frowning. “We need to get you back to the house. It’s not deep, but you’re losing a lot of blood. We need to move, now.”

Takeshi complains loudly, but allows Ryu and I to pick him up, his arms slung over our shoulders as we help him toward Ryu’s car.

“Got a real talent for making friends wherever you go, don’t you?” Ryu mutters.

“I was just trying to take my wife out on a fucking date. Jesus,” Takeshi grits.

I turn to him, grinning in spite of all the adrenaline, fear, and danger still coursing through my system. He glances at me, his lips curled in a smug smile.

“How’d I do with that, by the way?”

“Best date of my life,” I sign back.

Suddenly, I wince. Something sharp pricks into me, and through the haze of adrenaline, I realize that what I'm feeling in my side isn't an itch.

It's *pain*.

Frowning, I glance down, pulling aside my jacket before my heart drops.

Oh, fuck.

That's…a lot of blood.

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27

TAKESHI

THE SHARP LINES of the Ishida house cut against the midnight sky. With Ryu on my heels, I push the heavy doors open with my shoulder, cradling Katarina to me.

Her head rests against my chest. Blood seeps through the makeshift bandage wrapped around her side, staining my shirt and reminding me of the chaos we narrowly escaped.

The moment we're inside, people are rushing to us—guards, staff, Nina. I snarl before anyone can get too close.

"Back the *fuck* off."

They freeze, concern morphing into wary hesitation as my voice thunders through the grand hall. I don't have the time or patience for their hovering or well-meaning incompetence today.

She's mine to take care of.

"Takeshi, she's hurt—" Nina starts, her voice tight.

"I know," I growl, my voice gentler than it was a second ago but still not breaking my stride. My boots echo on the polished floors as I carry Katarina up the stairs. My head swivels to a totally confused Nina. "I've *got* it."

Katarina lifts her head from my chest, raising a hand to sign "it's okay" to Nina.

Then she turns her gaze to me and tries to sign something, but I shake my head.

“Later,” I mutter. “We’re almost there.”

* * *

IN OUR BEDROOM, I kick the door shut behind us, stride into the en suite bathroom, and gently set her down on top of the vanity next to the sink. She grimaces, her coppery-blonde hair stuck to her temple where blood has dried in a thin line.

My chest tightens at the sight of her—the smallness, the fragility. Such a sharp contrast to the fiery confidence she usually wields. I hate it. I hate that someone hurt her.

I especially hate that it happened when I should have been protecting her.

I grab the first aid kit from under the sink. When I stand again, she’s turned to the mirror behind her, examining the cut on her forehead, her mouth a thin, determined line. I step in front of her, my hands steady as I open the kit.

“Don’t. Move,” I order firmly.

Her lips twitch, the ghost of a smirk breaking through her exhaustion. “Bossy,” she signs, her movements sluggish but clear. “I’m not dying. Just banged up.”

“Well, let’s get you unbanged.”

“That’s not a word.”

I fix her with a look. “Do I need to tie your hands?”

Katarina grins. Then her brow furrows when her gaze drops to my shirt.

“You’re in far worse shape than me,” she motions, her expression turning more serious. “Hang on—*stop*.”

She tries to push me away from where I'm dabbing at the blood on her temple, but I don’t budge. Finally, I end up grabbing her wrists and pinning them together.

“*Stop. Moving*,” I grunt.

I’ve still got her hands pinned. So instead of a reply, she just exhales sharply, wiggling just her fingers and making a face. But she *does* stop moving

I cut away her ruined shirt, peeling it away carefully from her wounds. She watches me as I clean the cut on her arm, eyes sharp despite the weariness in her face. I got most of the glass embedded in her skin out in Ryu’s car on the way back, but there’s still a tiny sliver in there. I grab a pair of tweezers and pause, meeting her eyes.

“This might hurt…” I warn.

She nods, her expression unchanging.

Quickly and precisely I extract the shard, her sharp inhalation the only sign of pain. Blood wells up immediately, and I press a clean cloth to the wound. She never flinches, and her eyes never leave mine.

“You’re ridiculous, you know that?” I mutter as I tape the bandage in place.

“For?” she signs slowly.

“For getting hurt,” I say roughly. “For…for making me care this much.”

Her eyes soften. Before she can respond I stand abruptly, grabbing another cloth to clean the abrasions on her knees and arm. Then I move to her temple, dabbing it gently, relieved to discover it’s just a superficial cut.

When I’m done bandaging her up she still looks fragile but the defiance is back, her chin tilted upward as if daring me to say what I’m thinking.

“Your turn,” she signs, nodding to my side.

I glance down at the blood soaking through my shirt. “Eh, it’s fine.”

She snorts. “It’s not,” she counters, her hands moving with surprising force. “Sit.”

I sigh but comply, dropping onto the closed toilet lid as she gathers the first aid supplies. Her hands are steady despite her exhaustion.

“Shirt,” she signs.

I peel off my ripped, bloodied t-shirt, dropping it onto the floor as she leans closer to the gash.

“This is going to sting,” she signs, her expression flat but her eyes holding a hint of amusement.

“I can handle it,” I reply, grinning.

She presses the antiseptic-soaked cloth to the wound on my side with more force than necessary, and I hiss through my teeth. She doesn’t apologize.

“Payback,” she simply signs.

“For…?”

“Being you.”

I laugh, the sound tumbling out. It’s a strange moment—quiet, almost domestic, yet charged with unspoken emotions. Her hands linger on my skin longer than necessary, her touch sending warmth through me that has nothing to do with the antiseptic.

When she finishes, she leans back against the counter. I rise slowly, my movements careful as I come closer to her. Her eyes meet mine, wary yet unyielding.

“You scare the hell out of me sometimes,” I mutter, my voice low.

She blinks. “Me?” she signs, caught off-guard, her hands moving hesitantly.

I nod, my gaze steady. “Yes. The way you fight, the way you refuse to back down. It’s…maddening.”

“And yet, here you are,” she replies, a slight smirk on her lips.

“Indeed,” I growl.

She flushes and looks down. Then her brow knits. “Wow, I’m really a mess.”

I grin as I turn away to start cleaning up everything on the floor. “The wraps on your cuts are waterproof. Take a shower, and I’ll grab you some food—”

I shut the fuck up when I turn to find her bent over, topless, in the middle of pulling off her yoga pants.

My eyes drag over the soft skin of her back and the bumps of her spine, down to the soft, tight globes of her ass. My teeth grind as I watch her peel her panties down, my dick twitching when I notice they stick a little to her pussy before dropping down to the floor.

I know she’s just been through a lot, that we’re both hurt and banged up.

But there’s no force on Earth that could stop me right now.

Katrina whimpers deep in her throat in that small, fluttery way she has that turns my dick to steel when I grab her from behind. I’m careful not to grip her anywhere I’ve bandaged, but there’s still a roughness to my touch as I pin her hips hard against the edge of the vanity. I grab a fistful of her hair, tugging her head back and twisting it to the side as my mouth drags up her neck.

“*If you’re too hurt…*” I growl into her ear.

She turns her head to look at me, gripping my hand as it cups her breast.

“*Fuck me however you want*,” she signs with shaking hands, pushing her ass back and grinding against the bulge in my pants.

She gasps sharply as I pinch her nipple, rolling the little bud between my fingers as I pull her hair again. My teeth rake up her neck as I drop my hand between her legs, rubbing her soaking wet pussy as she sighs deeply.

“I don’t want to hurt you,” I murmur into her neck.

“And if I want you to?” she signs back.

I groan, my cock painfully hard as I reach between us and yank open my belt. My zipper follows before I shove my pants and boxers down together,

nipping at her skin.

“I’m only going to warn you once: think very carefully before you say something like that to me,” I whisper into her ear. I sink two fingers into her pussy, curling them up against her front wall as she writhes, clinging to the counter.

“I don’t think my hands stuttered,” she manages to sign.

She twists her head, her eyes locking with mine as her lips hover an inch away. She pulls back just enough to lift her hands between us.

“*Hurt me*. Make it—”

A whimpered, choked cry of pleasure sticks in her throat as I roughly spank her bare ass. I can feel her pussy clenching around my fingers as I do it, flooding me with her wetness. So I do it again.

And again.

And *again*, until her pussy is quivering around my fingers as I pump them in and out.

I spank her ass a fifth time, drinking in the bloom of pink that erupts over her delicate skin. I bend her forward over the vanity, dropping down behind her. She shivers, and her legs tremble when my tongue drags up her lips, pushing between them as I taste her.

I ram my tongue into her, fucking her with it before I drag it to her clit, take the little bud between my lips and suck, rolling my tongue over it. My hands grip her ass, spanking her, spreading her lewdly wide, teasing her pussy as I suck on her clit.

My hands move higher, parting her cheeks as I groan into her pussy. My finger drags over her tight little hole, and Katarina *shudders* around me, a deep, guttural moan rumbling in her throat as I tease her ass.

Who am I to deny her that?

She stiffens as I slide my tongue back, dragging it between her cheeks until the tip teases over her asshole. Then her indistinct grunts become louder and she grips the counter as I swirl my tongue around her puckered ring,

spitting on it and stabbing it with the tip of my tongue. She pushes back eagerly like a greedy little slut for my tongue as I rim her asshole.

Spit is dripping down her inner thighs when I finally pull away and stand.

“Don’t you fucking *move*,” I growl, fisting my cock and kicking my pants away as I grab a handful of her hair. I line my cock up with her slick, pink pussy as I yank her head up, making her look at herself in the mirror.

“I want you to watch yourself get fucked like a bad girl.”

I ram in with a single stroke, my balls slapping her clit. Katarina’s face explodes with heat and her eyes roll back in her head as a deep, aching moan wrenches from her lips. I pound into her, my hips hitting her ass over and over as I fuck her mercilessly, like I’m laying claim to her.

Conquering her.

Telling the whole fucking world that she’s *mine*.

My fucking wife.

Katarina’s hands press on the mirror in front of her as I fuck her hard and deep. The filthy, wet sounds of us grinding together fill the room, and I swear I can’t look away from the sight of her face caving in pleasure as I push her closer to her release.

Her eyes lock with mine as her mouth falls open in a silent scream of pleasure.

I groan when I feel her explode around me, her pussy milking the cum from my cock as she shatters for me. She grinds back on me, rolling her hips over and over as she comes again and again, flooding my balls with her sticky cum.

My eyes drop to where her pink glistening pussy is stretched wide around my thick cock. Something dark, dangerous, and *hungry* growls inside me as my gaze drifts to her tight little back hole.

Fuck me however you want to.

Hurt me.

Katarina jolts when she feels my wet thumb rub over her ass. She twists her head around, her eyes wide as they lock on mine.

“Are you—” she signs, her hands faltering as my thumb slowly pushes into her. A guttural cry of pleasure rumbles in her throat as I start to grind my cock in and out of her pussy, my thumb still teasing her ass.

“*You’re my wife*,” I growl, leaning in and searing my lips to hers. “*All of you*.”

I start to pull my thumb out, but she grabs my wrist, keeping me right where I am. Her eyes hold mine, a mix of fear and pleasure in her gaze as she pulls my thumb back in, deeper.

My dick twitches inside her pussy.

God, this woman drives me insane.

I keep fucking her ass with my thumb as I grind my cock in and out. Slowly, I replace my thumb with a finger. Then a second. Her breath comes in choked gasps as I slowly pull my slick cock from her wet pussy.

I slide my fingers out of her stretched-out back hole and spit on it.

Kat grunts at the filthy gesture. *Fuck.*

I do it again, rubbing my spit into her hole before I bring my slick head against it.

“Face the mirror, wife,” I growl, grabbing a hank of her hair and twisting her head so that she’s looking at her reflection in the mirror.

“I want you to watch your tight little ass swallowing every inch of my dick like a good girl.”

I start to push. For a second, her face tenses up. But when I pause, she shakes her head, her eyes holding mine in the reflection. I keep going, adding more pressure bit by bit until suddenly, my head pops through.

Fuck. Me.

Katarina jolts in pleasure, her back arching and her legs shaking. She reaches between her legs, and I groan when her fingers brush my balls as

she starts to rub her clit.

I grunt, forcing another inch into her impossibly tight little hole as she writhes in a mix of pleasure and pain. My balls tighten as I grit my teeth, sliding deeper and deeper, easing my swollen dick up her ass as she rubs her clit furiously.

My fist tightens in her hair as I push the rest of the way in, both of us shuddering as we lock eyes.

Slowly, she nods, her gaze pleading with me to do it.

To fuck her.

Claim her.

Take every fucking shred of her, and keep it bound to me forever.

Slowly I ease out, hissing in pleasure as her tight ring grips me like a vice. Katarina's knees shake as I push back in, driving deep until my balls are up against her working fingers again.

Then, I start to *fuck her*.

I start slow, easing in and out. Then gradually, as she opens for me, I begin to move faster.

Thrust harder.

Take more of her.

Her face crumples with pleasure, almost drooling as I ream her. Her fingers roll and rub at her clit, and when she comes suddenly, her ass clamping down around me, I groan.

Sweat drips down my spine. My fingers dig into her skin, running over every inch of her, touching her everywhere. I spank her ass, I cup her breasts, I twist her nipples. I wrap one hand around her throat and use the other to finger her alongside her.

The world becomes a blur as her throaty grunts of pleasure and my groans fill the bathroom, until we’re both crashing toward the point of no return.

When Kat comes again, there's no holding back.

There never *has been* any holding back when it comes to her.

When she shatters again, her ass squeezing me, I join her. With a savage growl, I ram deep, leaning over, sinking my teeth into her shoulder. Cum erupts from my swollen cock, filling her ass as we explode together.

* * *

AFTER THAT, everything is a haze. I'm vaguely aware of sliding out of her. Of Kat twisting in my arms, crushing her mouth to mine and practically crawling into my arms.

Our bandages have come off, and we're both bleeding. I fix us both up, filling the tub with warm, sudsy water, then carrying her to it, and pulling her onto my lap.

We clean each other up, then she's sliding down onto my hard cock again.

I fuck her again in bed. This time, we fall asleep with me still inside her, her head on my chest, her breath on my skin.

And my heart completely in her hands.

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TAKESHI

AT FIRST, I think I'm imagining the haunting sound permeating my thoughts, pulling me from whatever I was dreaming about. But when it comes again, and the dreams recede to the shadows around me, I realize I'm not dreaming at all.

I stir in bed, slowly emerging from sleep, feeling the soft weight of Katarina still dozing on my chest. Then I hear it—a faint, breathless murmur, slipping through the stillness like a ghost that doesn't belong.

Holy fuck.

The sound is coming from her throat. But that's not what stuns me to my core.

…It's that the sound was *wildly* close to being a word.

Help.

I strain my ears, willing her to say it again.

"*Mmmhehhp!*"

Fucking hell.

The sound slips from Katarina's lips again. It's broken and fractured, but unmistakably her voice. She's restless on top of me, her body twisting as her feet kick at and twist the sheets, her face tight with distress.

“Katarina…” I murmur softly, leaning closer. Her eyelids flutter, her breath quickens, but she doesn’t wake. Instead, the soft, choked sound comes again, and when it does, it tears something inside me.

“*Mmmhehhp!*”

She’s calling for help.

With her *voice*.

I shake her gently. “Katarina. *Kat*!”

She jerks awake with a gasp, her gray eyes wide and unfocused. For a moment she looks right through me, fear etched on her face raw enough to make my chest ache. I reach for her, pulling her shaking body into my arms.

“Shh,” I murmur, my hand sliding up and down her back. “It's okay. It was just a dream.”

Her breathing is ragged, her frame trembling as she clings to me. She doesn’t sign anything, her hands gripping my torso like it's a lifeline. It takes a few minutes for her to calm and the tension to ebb from her body.

Finally, she leans back slightly, her eyes meeting mine with a vulnerability that’s rare for her. “Tell me what chases you at night, princess,” I whisper.

She hesitates, her gaze dropping to the space between us. Then, with trembling hands, she begins to sign.

Her movements are slow and hesitant at first, but they gradually grow more confident as she continues. She tells me about the Chibari-kai, a rival Yakuza family, and about the nightmare they made her endure, kidnapping her when she was just a girl and locking her in a dark, damp basement for a week.

More than a week.

How she was terrified, starved, and left to wonder if anyone would ever come for her. How every now and then, those motherfuckers would barge into her dark cell and threaten to beat her, rape her, or kill her.

Jesus. I want to rip a hole in time, go back, and destroy them. Slowly. Painfully.

Her hands falter for a moment but she presses on, telling me about the rescue attempt—how the kidnappers fled with her, taking her in their car as they tried to escape.

She tells me about the crash, the car careening off a cliff, the metal tearing through her body, leaving her broken and bleeding.

She stops, her hands trembling in her lap. Her gaze flicks to me hesitantly before she takes a steadying breath and continues.

“All that…changed me,” she motions. “It stole my voice. I don’t know why. I wish I did.”

I cup her cheek, using my thumb to brush away the single tear that beads in her eye.

“There’s something else that whole experience took from me, Tak,” she signs slowly. Her eye lift to mine with a haunting edge to them.

“I can’t have children.”

Both of us go still, our gazes locked together.

“I just take the pills to regulate my cycle,” she continues. “When you messed around with them before, I was mad because I felt out of control, not because I was worried you might get me pregnant.”

The air feels heavy around us. I don’t say anything at first, my mind reeling. Finally, she breaks the silence, her face tinged with bitterness.

“You got cheated,” she signs. “You got a defective bride.”

Her words ignite a fierce protectiveness in me, roaring to life in my chest. I grab her hands gently, silencing her before she can sign anything else.

“What the *hell* makes you think someone like me should be a father?” I murmur.

Her eyes widen slightly and for a moment neither of us speaks, the weight of her confession settling between us like a stone.

I feel a shift inside me.

I came here and barged into her life because I had a plan. A vendetta. But now something's changed.

Maybe *I've* changed.

She's not part of my plan anymore.

She *is* my plan.

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KATARINA

SUNLIGHT STREAMS through the windows and spills across the polished wood floors, soft and golden.

For the first time in what seems like forever, the Ishida house feels alive, not suffocating. My steps are lighter. My mood is elevated.

I’m enjoying it.

I’ve healed from the injuries from the crash and the masked biker's attack. Takeshi has too, though he’d never admit that he was hurt to begin with.

Something shifted during those days of recovery, turning the twisted darkness or whatever it was between us into something *more*.

Something bigger.

It’s not just physical attraction anymore. It’s deep, turbulent, and messy in a way that makes me feel simultaneously grounded and adrift. Takeshi’s intensity still terrifies me, but it also draws me in, binding me in ways I never thought possible.

And whatever this is between us, it feels real.

Tangible.

Alive.

The thought lingers as I sit in the meeting room, surrounded by Ryu and several of the Ishida-kai *waka gashira*, discussing supply chain issues and

concerns about some Triad-affiliated gangs near the seaport district who have been scoping out Ishida-kai warehouses.

I’m trying to concentrate, but it’s tough. Papa is in the hospital again, this time for the first of a few surgeries to clear the tumor from his spine.

I was there earlier this morning to hold his hand as they wheeled him into the OR. But the surgery is going to take eleven hours, and he’ll be out for a while after. I *could* stay and pace a trench into the linoleum of the hospital hallway until he's awake again, but I know he’d rather I was here, sitting at the head of this table, leading.

So that’s what I’m doing.

“The Vorobev family has been quiet lately,” Ryu says cautiously as he glances around the table. “A bit *too* quiet.”

Apparently, Sergey is still pissed that his fuckwad son was summarily dismissed from contention to marry me.

Cue the tiniest violin in the world.

“Sergey is sulking,” I sign, shrugging. “We should remind him that he’s a big boy, and suggest that he pull up his big boy pants and move on.”

A few of my captains grin and chuckle when Nina translates.

“No, but seriously,” I continue. “We should keep an eye on them. This is Sergey’s way, not to announce anything loudly. If he’s going to try anything stupid, he’ll wait until he thinks we’re not watching.”

“So let’s make sure we’re *always* watching,” Ryu grunts to the table, his mouth pressed to a grim line.

Ryu has always been my fiercest ally. But with Papa in and out of the hospital more and more these days, and me basically sitting on the throne, he’s become my superhero. And though I’d never admit it out loud, his steadying presence has become a real source of strength for me. He watches over me like a hawk, and his loyalty is something I’ll never take for granted.

When the meeting wraps up an hour later, Ryu stops me as I start to stand.

“I think we should delay this next sit down,” he growls quietly in my ear.

I arch a questioning brow. We’ve got plans to meet with Li Fan, the leader of the Jade Dragons, in about two hours. He’s both the most powerful, and by all accounts, the most *reasonable* and level-headed leader of the Chinese Triad gangs that operate in Tokyo.

Since there’s been a recent uptick in Triad activity in our areas of the seaport, something obviously has to give. But rather than go with Ryu’s idea of sending in a small army to spill blood, I'd like to try the carrot before we whip out the stick.

“Li Fan seems open to negotiations,” I sign to Ryu. “And he’s vocally opposed to the actions of the other Triad gangs who’ve actively tried to take parts of our territory. I’m willing to let him have his own space, even do business with him, so long as he makes sure the other Triad organizations stay the fuck off of our turf.”

Ryu smiles. “Your father has raised quite the Queen. I hope you know that.”

I mime a dramatic curtsey, and he chuckles briefly before his look sours again.

“I agree with your plan to speak civilly with Li Fan. It’s a wise move. But we should have the meeting *here*, rather than the seaport district. I don’t like how much activity we’ve been seeing with the Triads in that area *not* under his control. I’m also concerned with the rumblings from the Vorobev family.”

I nod slowly, considering. Then I shake my head.

“I appreciate your concern. But I think moving the meeting last minute shows weakness and indecision. We’ll proceed as planned.”

Ryu scowls.

“We’ll bring an extra car full of men, well-armed,” I add.

Rya nods gruffly. “I can…live with that.”

“Good. Now, let’s go be diplomatic.”

* * *

“Ms. Ishida. It is an honor to meet you face to face at last.”

Li Fan is a tall, handsome man who clearly takes a lot of care with his appearance. He’s wearing a custom-tailored dark maroon suit—Armani—with a crisp black linen shirt beneath it. His black hair is buzzed on the sides and stylishly slicked back on top, and hints of Triad tattoo ink creep up his neck and out the cuffs beneath the Rolex on his wrist.

He bows low to me in a traditional show of respect before he straightens and offers his hand in a Western greeting.

“The pleasure is all ours, Mr. Fan,” Nina smiles, bowing toward the Triad leader and translating my signed response.

I don’t *love* the idea of her being in clandestine mafia meetings in seaport warehouses with unknown variables out the ass. Not because I don’t think she can handle herself.

Just that—I worry about her.

“Shall we sit?”

Li Fan gestures to a table set up in the middle of the warehouse surrounded by high stacks of shipping containers and wooden crates. I take a seat across from him, with Ryu and Nina on either side of me and a group of guards at my back.

“Do you mind?” Li raises a pack of cigarettes. I incline my head graciously, and he nods, slips one between his lips, and lights it.

Then he leans back in his chair, drumming his fingers on the table as he speaks.

“First of all, I want to say that I have the utmost respect for both you and your father. I understand that there have been some”…he frowns… “*incursions* by other Triad families into what is unquestionably Ishida-kai territory. You have my word that the Jade Dragons are not involved in these provocations, nor do we have any inclination to be so.”

He grins as he exhales smoke through his nose.

“Ancient Chinese proverb: don’t *fuck* with the biggest kid on the block,” he chuckles. “I don’t plan to.”

Good. We’re off to a great start.

“Thank you,” I sign back as Nina translates. “I appreciate your candor. Given that your organization is not part of the instigations, I’d like to offer you a sort of partnership, if you’re open to the idea.”

He spreads his arms wide. “Of course. My only goal today is to stop any animosity between our organizations before it starts, and express my desire to…” He clears his throat significantly.

“Keep the territory you already have in the seaport?”

He dips his chin. “Indeed.”

I nod. “I see no problem there. If I’ve heard correctly, your father fought hard to establish your territory here. I respect that. So here’s my offer: you have influence with most of the other Triad families in Tokyo. Get them in line. Make it clear to them that the consequences for fucking with my organization will be painfully severe. In exchange, I’m prepared not only to leave the boundaries of your territory alone, but also to outsource ten percent of our seaport logistics operations to the Jade Dragons.”

Li can’t hide his surprise when Nina translates that last part to him. He glances behind him at some of his captains and advisors. But I can see his mind is already made up. This is an easy deal to say yes to.

“Ms. Ishida.” Li smiles widely, stubbing out his cigarette in an ashtray and reaching across the table with an open hand. “I’d say we have a d—”

His words cut off with a wet, gurgling cough. Blood sprays into the air as Li Fan lurches sideways, wrenched out of his chair in a crimson mist as the sharp snap of a gunshot echoes through the warehouse.

“Get down!” Ryu roars. Instantly he’s crashing into me, tackling me to the floor as the windows of the warehouse shatter in a hail of glass and bullets.

Chaos erupts everywhere. Both Li Fan's men and our own yank out their weapons and start returning fire through the windows as everyone ducks for cover.

Nina screams as she dives for the floor. I grab her when Ryu lurches to his feet and starts shooting, yanking her under the table and then tipping it over sideways, blocking us from view of the windows.

"*Stay here!*" I sign frantically before I spin, my eyes landing on Li.

Shit.

My heart pounds as I rush to him. He's on the floor, clutching his arm where a bullet has torn clear through the flesh. Blood is pooling beneath him, and his face is twisted in pain.

"Stay still," I sign frantically, pressing my hands to the wound to try to slow the bleeding. Nina is suddenly beside me, her face pale but focused as she glances at me and then turns to Li, relaying what I just said.

Li grits his teeth, his uninjured hand fumbling at his side. I barely register what he's doing until he pulls out a pistol, raising it over my shoulder. The deafening crack of the shot startles me, and I whirl just in time to see one of the attackers collapse to the ground, a dark hole in his chest.

Obvious Bratva ink covers his forearms.

Fuck.

Sergey's men.

"Stay down, Kat!" Ryu barks, firing his weapon as more gunfire erupts around us. Additional Vorobev men stream through one of the side doors into the warehouse, faces twisted with grim determination. There's an earsplitting sound of wrenching metal as an SUV crashes through the main doors, tires screeching against the concrete. More Russians pour out, their guns blazing.

"*Move*!" Ryu yells, grabbing my arm and pulling me to cover.

"Help me with him!" I sign frantically to Nina, jabbing a finger at Li. She nods, her face pale but determined, and we grab the Triad leader under the

arms and drag him as Ryu covers us.

But there are too many of them. Not enough of us.

Oh fuck—

Nina screams as Ryu goes down with a grunt, blood blooming across his side. All four of us collapse behind a crate as gunfire sprays the back of it.

“I’m fine,” Ryu snarls, trying to push me away. “Get out of here, Katarina! NOW!”

“Like hell,” I sign, grabbing his arm, my hands trembling. “I’m not leaving you.”

“Take him!” Li grunts, gritting his teeth and checking the clip of his gun. “I’ll cover you!”

I shoot him a look.

“We have a *deal*, Katarina-sama,” he growls. “That makes us allies.” He chambers a round in his gun, takes a breath, then twists around the side of the crate, wincing in pain. He raises his gun, squeezing off a few shots before he ducks back. “Get the fuck out of here,” he hisses. “I’ll hold them off!”

The gunfire is intensifying, the air thick with smoke and the smell of blood as I lock eyes with Li Fan and nod. Nina and I drag Ryu away, crouching low, before we tumble behind a stack of crates as bullets ricochet around us.

“There’s too many of them!” Nina shrieks, her voice tight with fear.

I glance down at Ryu, my pulse pounding.

Shit. He looks bad. His face is pale, and his eyes wander aimlessly. Blood is puddling beneath him.

I glance around, my mind racing. The exit is blocked, and the attackers are closing in. I grab Ryu’s gun from his limp hand. My fingers tighten around the grip as I peer out from behind the crates, raise the gun, and start firing on the advancing Bratva.

One of my shots hits its mark, and a man goes down with a scream. But immediately more of them surge forward, their sheer numbers overwhelming. My breath turns ragged as I duck back behind cover.

“We’re not going to make it,” Nina whispers, her voice trembling.

“Yes, we are,” I sign fiercely, my hands determined. “We—”

It all happens so fast. One second, it’s just Nina, Ryu, and I behind the crates. The next second, five huge Russians come charging around with weapons drawn.

Nina screams, kicking and fighting as two of them grab her, lifting her off the ground. I scramble to my feet, but before I can raise my gun, a hand cracks hard across my face.

Fuck.

Stars dance through my vision as gravity takes me down. I hit the ground sharply, wincing as everything wobbles and swims.

Ryu is trying to stand, but another Vorobev man kicks him hard in the face, making him collapse instantly.

No.

I jump up, my vision still blurry as I charge the men trying to drag Nina away, but it’s too late.

I barely have time to process what’s happening as I’m grabbed from behind. A strong arm wraps around my waist, yanking me off balance, and another hand wrenches the gun from my grasp. I thrash wildly, clawing at my captor’s arm, but it’s useless.

“Now, we teach you some *respect*,” a familiar voice hisses in my ear, low and menacing.

Rodion.

A jolt of terror rips through me as a bag is slammed over my head, plunging me into darkness.

The last thing I hear is Nina’s muffled cries.

Then something strikes the back of my head.

And after that—there's nothing.

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TAKESHI

THE ROAR of my bike splits the night as I tear through the city like a man possessed. I lean into the curves, the tires hovering on the bleeding edge of control with each sharp turn.

They took her.

They *have* her.

A million black, venomous thoughts churn through my brain as I race toward the seaport where the warehouse attack took place. All I know is that one of the Ishida-kai men there managed to call one of the top *waka gashira* at our compound, croaking something about an ambush. That someone had taken Katarina.

My chest tightens with every second that passes.

She didn't even tell me she was *going* to a fucking meeting with the goddamn Triads—let alone at night, in an old warehouse. I'm sure she knew if she *had*, I would have tied her to the nearest immovable object rather than let her walk into that.

But she did.

And here we are.

I've barely killed the engine as I swing off the bike, momentum still carrying it forward slightly. My boots hit the ground hard, and I'm already running.

The scene that greets me in the warehouse stops me cold.

The floor is slick with blood, and bodies are strewn everywhere—Triad and Ishida-kai alike. An acrid, coppery scent fills the air, mingling with the tang of fear. Faint groans and labored breathing tell me that not everyone is dead, but the scale of the carnage is enough to make my fists clench and my stomach turn.

“Takeshi-sama!” One of the Ishida-kai men waves me over as I scan the room, looking for Kat. His face is pale as he crouches beside a fallen figure.

It occurs to me that I’m the *de facto* leader of the Ishida-kai right now. Katarina has been taken. Kolya is in the middle of the first surgery on his back—he had been put under before news of what happened here could reach him. Ryu, who I know came to this meeting with Katarina, is either also missing, or amongst the dead.

That leaves me.

It hits me just how differently I’m reacting to this situation now compared to how I would have before, when she was just a means to an end. When settling the bad blood between our families was only part of my plan.

Before, a situation like this would have presented the *ideal* scenario for me to enact my vengeance on a man who is currently completely vulnerable, knocked out on an operating table.

But now isn’t before. Now, there’s something on the line far more important to me than revenge.

Katarina.

I *have* to get her back. And I need to do it before those motherfuckers who took her hurt her, or even think about touching her.

I jog toward the man who called me over. My gaze drops to the body he’s kneeling beside.

Li Fan, the leader of the Jade Dragons, is propped up against a stack of crates, his expensive suit soaked with blood. He’s breathing, but barely. His

hand trembles as he clutches his side, his dark eyes flicking up to meet mine.

“Takeshi-san,” he wheezes.

I crouch beside him, my gaze darting over his wounds. “Who did this?” I snarl. “Bratva?”

He grits his teeth, his other hand pointing weakly. I follow the motion, frowning when I see the smear of blood he’s trying to draw my attention to.

“I tried…” He coughs, blood staining his lips. “Tried to protect her.”

His words are a punch to the gut, but I force myself to focus. “Who has her?!”

“Sergey…Vorobev.” His voice is little more than a hiss, but the words land like a bomb.

“*Fuck*,” I snarl.

Li Fan groans, his strength ebbing away as he lifts his arm slightly. My eyes widen when I see the numbers scrawled across his forearm in his own blood.

Fuck me, it’s a license plate number.

“Smart bastard,” I mutter, locking eyes with the fading Triad leader. I turn to the Ishida-kai man crouched next to us. “Get him help, *now*,” I growl. “Quickly.”

The man nods curtly as I pull away, grabbing my phone and stabbing the contact for the best hacker I know.

Luckily, she also happens to be married to my cousin.

It rings twice before she answers. “Hey, Tak—”

“I need your help,” I growl. “*Now*.”

Freya sighs heavily. “*Hi*, Freya. How *are* you, Freya? It’s been *such* a long time since I fucked off to Tokyo. Freya. We haven’t hung out since, Freya. How—”

“FREYA!” I roar. “They have Katarina!”

The levity evaporates from her tone. “*Shit*, Tak,” she hisses, instantly all business. “What do you need?”

“A license plate tracked. It should be tied to Sergey Vorobev”

“Send it to me,” she says, her voice sharp.

I snap a quick photo of Li Fan’s arm and text it to her. “Quickly, Freya.”

“On it,” she replies, and the line goes dead.

I glance back at Li Fan, who’s struggling to keep his eyes open. “You did good,” I tell him gruffly, though the words feel hollow.

He grunts, smiling weakly as an Ishida-kai man applies a makeshift dressing to his wounds.

I stand, my mind racing as I take in the rest of the room: the bodies. The blood. The sheer chaos.

So—this is what being in charge feels like.

I start barking orders to the remaining Ishida-kai men. “Find out who’s still breathing,” I growl. “And someone get a fucking cleanup crew in here.”

My chest feels tight as I glance toward the warehouse doors. Somewhere out there, Katarina is in the hands of men who would love to see her broken —or worse. The thought sends a cold, murderous fury through me.

Just then, my phone buzzes.

It’s Freya.

“Got a hit on the plate,” she says without preamble.

“Where?” I demand.

“On its way to Chiba. I did some digging: there’s a warehouse there owned by a Vorobev shell company. Looks like they’ve used it before as a stopgap safe house. Sending you the address now.”

“Thanks, Freya,” I growl curtly.

“Tak,” she says before I can end the call. “Be careful.”

I don’t respond. Instead, I just turn to the nearest man and relay the information. “Let's go,” I bark, fury roaring through me. “*Now*.”

I mount my bike again. Chiba is less than an hour from Tokyo. But they’ve got a head start.

And God only knows what those Russian motherfuckers might do to her before I can get there.

I don’t care how many men Sergey has. I don’t care what kind of trap they might have waiting for me.

I *will* find Katarina. And I’ll eradicate anyone who’s harmed a hair on her head.

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KATARINA

THE AIR IS damp and thick as it clings to the back of my throat, smelling of motor oil and stale cigarettes.

I drop my head back against the cold concrete wall, trying to steady my breathing. The manacle around one of my ankles and one of my wrists—so tight that there's no chance of slipping out of them—bite into my skin, the chains rattling faintly whenever I shift.

The room is small, cramped, and reeks of death and rot. There's a rusty metal table in the middle, over a grimy drain in the floor. The three of us are all chained to the walls.

Across the room, Nina huddles on the floor, her knees drawn up to her chest. Her wide, tearful eyes dart around the windowless space like a cornered animal. She fidgets with the hem of her blouse, trembling, her movements frantic and uncoordinated.

My heart breaks for her.

Nina also grew up in the mafia world, to a mafia family. But we're… different. I love her to death, but she's not built to deal with a situation like this.

She needs to get out of here before she crumbles.

I whistle sharply to get her attention.

She lifts her gaze to mine. Her eyes are unfocused, swimming with fear.

“It’s going to be okay,” I lie, my hands moving slowly, deliberately.

Her lip quivers. “They’re going to kill us,” she whispers, so quietly I can barely hear.

“No,” I sign again, shaking my head, my movements surer. “They’re not.”

Even as I try to reassure her, my own pulse thrums with terror.

Ryu groans from his spot on the floor—deliberately chained too far away for either Nina or I to reach. He’s pale, his breathing shallow, and the blood on his shirt has turned dark and sticky. A fresh pool spreads beneath him, the metallic tang of it hanging sharp in the air.

“Hey,” I sign as his eyes flutter open, his hazy gaze drifting toward me. “Stay with me. Stay awake.”

He grunts, his eyelids fluttering. “I’ve been worse,” he mutters weakly. I don't believe him for a second. His wound is deep, and without medical attention, he won’t last long.

The door to the room creaks; I flinch at the sound. Sergey Vorobev strides in first, boots thudding on the floor. Rodion follows, his smirk wide and lecherous, flanked by four other Bratva men. Their malicious laughter grates on my nerves.

“Well, well,” Sergey drawls, his voice oozing satisfaction. “The Ishida princess and her loyal guard dog.”

Rodion sneers, his gaze flicking to Nina. “And what’s a princess without her handmaiden?”

One of the men steps forward, grabbing Nina by the jaw and yanking her head up. She whimpers, her eyes filling with fresh tears. My chains rattle as I lunge toward them, a growl rumbling in my throat.

“Let her go!” I sign furiously, my hands jerking against the manacles.

The man holding Nina ignores me, grinning down at my friend. “I like this one,” he growls in Russian. “I’d love to see those lips wrapped around my dick.”

“*I bite*,” Nina hisses back, also in Russian.

The man grins wider and leers at her. “*Then maybe I knock your teeth out first.*”

Sergey chuckles cruelly. “First things first,” he says, waving a hand dismissively. “I believe my son has been waiting for something.”

Rodion grins, stepping closer to me. “Yes, waiting,” he purrs, his predatory gaze raking over me.

My stomach churns as I yank at the chain again, the metal cutting into my skin.

“Such fire,” Sergey muses coldly. “But today, *malen'kaya printsessa*, you will learn the consequences of insulting me and my son.”

He turns to Rodion, clapping his disgusting offspring on the shoulder and smiling. “Have your fun. But leave her alive. We need her to fetch a nice ransom.”

And with that, Sergey strides out of the room, his cruel laughter echoing down the hall.

Rodion moves closer, four other men flanking him like wolves approaching prey. His fingers brush his belt buckle, and terror claws at my throat.

I jam up my middle finger, the gesture defiant despite the panic surging through me.

Rodion grins. “Oh, no, princess,” he purrs. “It’s *me* who’s going to fuck *you*.” He turns to his men. “Then I'll let them have their fun, too. I’m a generous man.”

The others chuckle darkly, grinning savagely at me.

“*Fuck you*!” Ryu snarls, instinctively trying to lunge at Rodion. But he can barely get up on one knee, and instantly crumples back to the ground.

The Russians laugh and Nina screams when one of them kicks Ryu hard in the side.

“Time to play, *bitch*.”

My blood turns to ice as I'm grabbed from the floor, my mind going numb. Nina is screaming. Ryu is spitting blood as he tries to get up again, even as that one guard keeps kicking him.

There's cold fire in my veins as Rodion unlocks my manacles, whips me around, and slams me hard against the rusty metal table. I blanch as he shoves me forward across it.

No.

Not this. Please.

It feels like I'm watching from a distance, feeling sick to my stomach and curling in on myself as Rodion grabs the back of my yoga pants and yanks them down over my ass. Hands paw at me, making me retch. I try to push him away, but one of his guards grabs my arms and drags them tight across the table, both pinning and silencing me.

Rodion grabs my ass again, chuckling darkly as he starts to undo his belt.

"Hold still, bitch," he orders, his tone gleeful.

Time slows as the air thickens with dread.

The scrape of a zipper undoing.

The pressure of rough hands.

The horrible, excruciating wait for the invasion of my body.

I close my eyes, a tear beading in the corner of one of them as the impending horror fades to a blur around me. Rodion's hands slide down my back, over my ass, about to move between my legs—

There's a screech as a metal door slams open, then the sound of a gun going off. Instantly, Rodion rips away from me, and I jolt as hot liquid splashes across my back.

The hands release me. My eyes fly open as I whip my head to the side.

Takeshi.

He storms into the room like the Devil himself—a frothing, savage, vengeful agent of malice. A wraith of fury. A mad emperor of havoc and destruction.

He's got a gun in one hand and a bloodied katana in the other. He raises the gun, putting a bullet through the brain of the man who was just holding me. Blood splatters across the wall as Nina screams.

The rest of the men rush Takeshi. He puts a second bullet through a second skull, then raises his sword high as he charges the others, roaring. I slump to the floor, staring at him in awe and terror as his blade flashes, cutting through the neck of one of the Russians and spraying a geyser of blood across the wall. The next man is run through with Takeshi's blade.

A choking, gurgling sound has my head snapping to the side. Rodion is slumped against a wall, his eyes wide, his hands desperately clutching at his neck to stop the heavy flow of blood gushing from the hole in his throat.

Takeshi storms across the room, winding his arm back. Rodion gurgles on his own blood and tries to raise a hand to ward off the attack.

But there's no stopping Takeshi's fury.

His katana splits first the air, then Rodion's hand from his wrist, and finally his head from his neck, letting it roll across the floor.

Takeshi rips his gaze to mine.

"*Kat…*"

I break as he rushes to me, the tears I've been holding back suddenly spilling free and pouring down my cheeks. His strong arms surround me, pulling me into him, and his hands are gentle as they pull my yoga pants back up over my ass. Slowly, he takes his jacket off and puts it around my shoulders as more Ishida-kai men pour into the room.

"*I'm here,*" he murmurs, holding me close. "I'm here, princess."

He turns toward the men hovering in the doorway.

"Get her out of those chains!" he snarls, nodding his chin at Nina. "And get him to a doctor *now*!" he roars, indicating Ryu.

My men spring into action as I cling to Takeshi, burrowing into his warmth and strength. Tears blur my vision as I clutch at his shirt. The scent of blood and sweat clings to him, but I don’t care. He saved me.

I’m still clinging to him as he carries me from the room, past more bodies of Vorobev soldiers, and then past a very headless Sergey himself.

“I’m right here, Kat,” he growls quietly. “And I’m not going anywhere. *Ever*.”

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KATARINA

THE ROOM IS DARK, a heavy, velvety blackness wrapping around me. For a moment, panic surges in my chest. Then my breath releases as the disorienting fog of sleep gives way to memory.

I'm in bed.

I'm *safe*.

My heart still thuds erratically as I calm myself, remembering that I'm back home in bed, not in that hellish hole in Chiba.

Except…I'm alone. I wasn't before.

I fell asleep in Takeshi's arms earlier.

My bottom lip retreats between my teeth. But as my hand slides over to his side of the bed, I smile.

The sheets are warm, and still smell like him—raw and masculine. I press my hand to the empty spot beside me, trying to reassure myself that he must have gotten up to use the bathroom or something.

I exhale, rolling my eyes at myself for panicking.

Still, my body refuses to relax. I wrap my arms around myself, trying to hold it together as the memories of the earlier nightmare claw their way to the surface.

The cold, metallic room. The smell of motor oil and blood. The chains biting into my skin. Sergey’s mocking voice. Rodion’s *hands*.

Then—Takeshi.

I replay the moment the door crashed in and he roared my name like a storm ripping into the room. I remember the way he tore through them all, his presence overwhelming, terrifying, and protective all at once.

He killed them all without hesitation, an uncaged feral beast. And then instantly, that fury and violence turned to calm protectiveness as his arms went around me, shielding me from it all.

I recall the way he carried me out of that hellish room, past Rodion’s lifeless—and *headless*—body. Then Sergey's.

Ryu is in the hospital now: they say he’ll be okay. Nina is shaken, but unhurt. Since I’ve got Tak, I’ve made sure Furrcules is spending the night in her room, which I think might help her sleep. My father is awake from his surgery, groggy but already asking questions. We talked on the phone earlier. Tomorrow I’ll visit him, and we’ll plan the utter and complete destruction of whatever remains of the Vorobev Bratva.

I sigh, trying to shake off the lingering panic. My gaze drifts across the room, and I realize the bathroom light is off.

Where is he?

I slide out of bed, wrapping myself in the duvet as I pad to the bathroom. It’s empty. I open the bedroom door and glance into the hallway, my pulse quickening.

The house is eerily quiet as I walk through my wing, my bare feet brushing over the cold floors. Finally I spot him in the living room—a dark silhouette against the neon glow of Tokyo beyond the floor-to-ceiling windows. His broad shoulders are stiff, his head bent.

He’s on the phone.

I start to step inside, but the quiet tension in his posture and the low growl of his voice stop me, prickling over my skin, warning me to stay silent.

I linger in the shadows, watching, listening.

“The plan was always the same,” he says, his voice low and rough. “Use her to get inside the Ishida-kai.”

It feels like I just got punched in the face—the words a physical blow, stealing the air from my lungs. My hands tremble, clutching the duvet tighter around me as I stand frozen in place.

“I wanted revenge, Hana,” he continues, his tone filled with a venom I’ve never heard in him before. “It was Kolya who killed Akira. I used her to get close to him.”

The room tilts. My legs barely hold me up. My heart shatters, breaking into a million jagged pieces as his words sink in.

Use her.

Get inside the Ishida-kai.

Revenge.

My breathing quickens and my chest tightens, the beginnings of a sob trying to claw its way up my throat.

“It was *him*,” he growls, his voice sharp as his katana blade. “He has to pay for what he did to Akira.”

I can’t listen anymore.

I take an unsteady step back. Then another. My foot brushes the edge of a table, the slight noise making me freeze.

Takeshi’s head tilts, his body tensing slightly, sensing something.

I don’t wait to see if he turns around. I spin and bolt back toward the bedroom, my heart hammering so loudly in my chest I can barely hear my own footsteps.

I have to get out of here.

The thought repeats in my mind on a loop, drowning out everything else. He’s been using me. All his protectiveness, the way he made me feel safe…

It’s all a lie, wrapped up in silk.

I reach the bedroom, closing the door quietly behind me as I collapse against it. My breath comes in ragged gasps as my vision blurs with tears.

How the *fuck* could I have been so stupid? He’s the enemy. He’s *always* been the enemy.

And I let him in: inside this house, this empire.

…Inside *me*: heart, body and soul.

I press my hand to my chest, as if I can physically hold the broken pieces together. My mind spins: was any of it real? The way he held me? Looked at me?

My stomach churns, bile rising in my throat as his words echo in my head: *Use her to get inside the Ishida-kai.*

I have to get the fuck out of here.

I throw some clothes on with trembling hands. My body feels cold, a chill seeping into my bones that no amount of layers will fix.

I grab a bag, hurriedly shoving a few essentials inside, my mind screaming at me to move faster. Every second feels like an eternity, and I half-expect the door to burst open at any moment and for Takeshi to be standing there.

It doesn’t.

I throw the bag over my shoulder and glance at the bed one last time. The duvet is balled up on it, a silent reminder of the warmth and the safety I thought he gave me.

A sob bubbles behind my lips as I turn and run, the walls closing in on me as I move quickly through the halls. My feet are silent on the floor, my body tense as I listen for any sign of him.

For a second, I almost go to the guards that I know are posted all over the house. But then I realize with a horrible jarring sensation that I don’t actually know who I can trust now. Takeshi’s been here for weeks, smiling, making friends…

Forming alliances.

I have no idea if “my men” are even “mine” anymore.

Maybe they’re *his* now.

I double back through the house. For a second, I pause, my heart beating faster when I spy Nina reading in the library, with Furrcules curled up beside her. I almost go to her, to tell her about the poison inside our house.

Except just then, one of the guards—a younger guy named Nagao—walks into the room. He nods at her, and they start to talk.

My blood runs cold. I *know* I’ve seen Nagao hanging out with Takeshi before—shooting the shit, cracking jokes.

Nina will have to wait.

I slip quietly into the kitchen. At the back of the pantry, there’s a shelf that swings out, leading to an old, waist-high metal door in the wall to receive firewood deliveries back in the day.

Historically, this is how I’ve snuck out of this house. Tonight, I’m using it again.

The old metal whines in protest, but I get it open it anyway, hoisting myself through and into the night.

Use her to get inside the Ishida-kai.

Tears blur my vision as turn away from the house. I don’t know where I’m going. I don’t have a plan.

But I can’t stay here.

I can’t stay *with him*.

I keep low, avoiding the patrols as I hug the shadows. I move quickly, skimming along the hedges until I get to the end of the house. I wait, watching a guard patrol cross the grounds before I make a break for it, bolting past the koi pond and rock garden until I get to the wall. At the far end, there’s small locked metal gate. But I use the key I’ve kept hidden for years under a nearby rock to get through that.

Outside, Tokyo rises around me as I bolt down the street behind our estate, then zigzag into an alley. At the end of that I turn again, moving in the direction of a café that usually has taxis out front.

When I get there, I'll text Nina and fill her in. Then I'll go to the hospital. The men there will absolutely be loyal to my father. And—

"Marianna."

My heart lurches into my throat at the sound of the voice.

What the…?

Slowly, I turn.

My eyes go wide.

"*You*…" I sign slowly. "How—"

An acrid mist sprays in my face. The figure in front of me blurs as my vision rolls.

Wait—

But the darkness doesn't listen. It just closes in around me.

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33

TAKESHI

THE ROOM IS quiet but for the faint hum of the city outside.

Neon light filters through the curtains, soft and muted, casting pale streaks across the bed.

Katarina sleeps curled warm against me, her breath steady and her face peaceful in a way that doesn't make sense, given everything she's been through.

I hold her possessively, my arm wrapped around her as if my grip alone could keep her safe. My fingers trace lazy circles on the skin of her shoulder, my mind racing in the stillness of the night.

She's so fierce, so strong, so unyielding against the world. And yet in this moment, she feels fragile against me, almost breakable. The jarring contrast twists something deep inside me.

My jaw clenches as my mind goes back to earlier: to cutting Sergey's fucking head off before walking into that disgusting room to see that motherfucker Rodion bending her over the table.

Touching her.

Hurting her.

Bringing sheer terror to her eyes.

My jaw clenches as something vicious sparks inside of me demanding blood before I tamp it down.

It's done now. They're both dead.

It's not enough, though.

Father and son might be rotting in hell, but the Vorobev Bratva still lives.

Tomorrow, that changes. Tomorrow, it all burns to the ground, reduced to ash and rubble like Carthage. Nothing will remain.

Her soft murmur pulls me from my thoughts. I glance down, watching her shift slightly in her sleep, her face press closer to my chest. I exhale away some of the tension in my shoulders.

How did I get here? Holding her like this, considering her safety like it's the most important thing in the world?

Probably because to me *it is*, *now*.

A light rips my attention away for a second, pulling my head to the side table. My phone lights up with Hana's name. I silence it before turning back to Kat.

I dip my head, brushing my lips against hers. The faint scent of her shampoo lingers, mixed with something uniquely hers that I can't describe but also can't get enough of. My hand moves to her hair, stroking it gently.

"I love you," I whisper, the words slipping out before I can stop them.

For a second, I freeze.

What the fuck, self?

I shake my head, scowling. I'm supposed to be a cold-blooded bastard with a plan. Not some sappy dipshit whispering sweet nothings to a sleeping woman.

And yet—yep, here I go again, leaning down to kiss her temple softly.

I grab my phone and carefully extricate myself from the bed, standing and pulling on loose pants and a t-shirt. The cool air bites at my skin, but I

ignore it as I step into the hall.

The living room is dark when I reach it, the city's neon glow spilling through the tall windows. I walk to them, staring out at Tokyo's sprawling lights. The skyline glitters, vibrant and alive, so different from the shadows swirling in my mind.

I tap on Hana's name and lift the phone to my ear, calling her back.

"Hey," my twin's voice comes through, light and teasing.

"What do you want?" I ask gruffly.

She snorts a laugh. "Oh my God, you and that charming personality, Tak. Never change."

I grin. "Been a weird day, sorry."

"So I heard," she says quietly, her tone changing. "Kenzo told me. Are you okay? Is Kat?"

I nod, exhaling slowly. "We're both fine. Ryu took a bullet."

Her breath hitches sharply. "Is he—"

"Alive," I interrupt. "Probably still a pain in the ass and kind of a dick, too."

Hana exhales. "Hey now. He's a good man."

I smirk. My sister has a weird soft spot for that fucker. I say "weird" because he actually shot Damian a few months ago. But maybe she feels bad since Damian shot *Ryu*, too. And his aim was a lot better.

"Yeah, well, I'll see if the hospital can double up his Jell-O or something."

She chuckles. "How about you? How're you doing?"

I exhale slowly, leaning my forehead against the glass. "It's all gone to shit, Hana."

There's a pause, then her voice softens. "What, exactly?"

"I had a plan," I say heavily. "I was committed to it. I worked on it for *months*."

“You mean your and Kenzo’s idea to neutralize the prospect of war between us and the Ishida-kai?”

I nod. “The plan was always the same,” I reply, my voice low and rough. “Use her to get inside the Ishida-kai.”

Hana swears under her breath. “Fuck, Tak…”

“I wanted revenge, Hana,” I growl quietly.“It was Kolya who killed Akira. I used her to get close to him.”

“You’re sure about Kolya? That he—”

“It was *him*,” I cut her off, my tone sharp. “He has to pay for what he did to Akira.”

For a second, I swear I hear something. But when I shut the fuck up and tilt my head to the side, I relax when I hear it again: it’s just a fucking car horn going off somewhere in the city.

Hana sighs heavily. “But is there *proof*?”

I shake my head. “I’m working on it. I’ve tried to hack into his systems, but there’s nothing there so far.”

“Have you asked Freya for help?” she asks.

“No,” I say quickly. “This is about me, not the family. I don’t want to involve any of you.”

“Tak,” she says firmly. “Let us help. You don’t have to do this alone.”

I clench my jaw, thinking.

“There’s something Kolya’s hiding,” I finally admit. “He keeps meticulous records but there are entire parts of his businesses, his world, that are missing from his system. That means they’re somewhere else. I just need to find out where.”

“Why bother?” Hana asks. “If you’re so sure he did this, why waste time?”

I don't respond, my gaze dropping to the floor. I know the answer, but saying it out loud feels like a betrayal.

When Hana speaks again, her voice is tinged with disbelief. “This is about her, isn’t it?”

I run a hand through my hair, frustration simmering beneath the surface. “She needs to see proof, or she’ll never believe it.”

“And if she does believe it?” Hana asks. “What then?”

I don’t have an answer for her.

The silence stretches between us, heavy and unending. Hana sighs again, and I can hear the faint edge of worry in her voice.

“Can I ask you something?”

“Sure,” I grunt.

“It’s…” My sister sighs. “It’s a big question.”

“Hana—”

“*Do you love her*? Is that the problem? That you’ve fallen in love with the daughter of the man on whom you’re trying to wreak vengeance?”

My eye close as I drop my forehead again to the cool glass.

“*Yes*,” I murmur.

Hana and I talk a little while longer. But eventually, I say goodnight to my sister and sink onto the couch by the windows, gazing out over the city.

I came here with a plan. A vendetta.

But somehow, Katarina has taken everything I thought I knew about everything, and turned it upside down and inside out.

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34

AKIRA

I WATCH her as she slips through the darkness.

It's what I'm best at: watching. Waiting for her. Looking from a distance.

She doesn't know I'm here. She moves like a shadow herself, darting between the pools of light cast by the estate's lamps, her movements quick.

Marianna.

She keeps calling herself by that other name. But it doesn't matter.

She was never supposed to be his.

She was always mine.

My hands clench to fists at my sides as I watch her. She pauses by the gate, crouching to retrieve the key she thinks no one knows about. My lips curl into a faint smile.

Always so clever, my Marianna.

She's graceful even in haste, her fingers deft as they work the lock. She steps through the gate, closing it quietly behind her before disappearing into the shadows beyond the estate.

I follow.

It's easy. Always has been. No one sees me unless I want them to. It's a skill I learned long ago—one that makes me good at what I do. She moves

quickly, her steps light on the uneven pavement, but she’s not fast enough to lose me.

She doesn’t look back.

I stay close but not too close, my footsteps silent, my breathing quiet and steady. My hand curls around the small spray bottle in my pocket, fingers brushing the cool metal.

I don’t want to hurt her.

She wouldn’t understand, not yet. She’s confused, lost in a world that’s taken her memories and made her forget. She forgets *me*. Forgets what we mean to each other.

I just need to take her somewhere safe. Somewhere far away from all this.

If I can help her relax, she'll remember.

She stops abruptly, her head tilting slightly. My breath catches and I freeze, my heart pounding in my chest.

“Marianna.”

Slowly, she turns.

Her gray eyes widen when they find me, the dim light catching their depths. Beautiful eyes. The kind of eyes that would make a man do anything.

She motions with her hands. My brow furrows. I’ve seen her do this before, make these strange movements, as if she’s trying to speak without using words.

I don’t understand: why won’t she just talk to me like she used to?

She stumbles back, but I’m faster. The bottle is already in my hand, the mist spraying in a fine, silent cloud before she can react.

Her body stiffens, her eyes locking on mine as the chemical takes hold.

“Hello, my love,” I whisper, catching her as her knees buckle.

She sags against me, her eyes rolling back. I cradle her, so fragile in my arms, my grip firm but gentle, as though she might shatter if I'm not careful.

For a moment I just hold her, my heart racing as I feel the warmth of her against me. She's here. Finally, she's *here*.

"I've missed you so much," I murmur, brushing a strand of coppery blonde hair from her face. "But don't worry. We'll fix this. I'll make you remember."

Her eyes flutter, half-lidded and glassy, as she struggles to focus on me. She doesn't speak but her fingers twitch, as though she's trying to make those strange motions again.

"It's okay, my love," I croon, my voice low and soothing. "You don't have to say anything. Just rest, Marianna. I'll take care of everything."

The streets are empty as I move quickly, carrying her in my arms. The city feels like it's holding its breath, the silence pressing in around us as I make my way to the car parked just a block away.

No one sees us. No one stops us.

I place her gently in the back seat, adjusting her so she's comfortable. Her head lolls a little to the side, her breathing shallow but steady. I pause, my fingers brushing her cheek as I take one last look at her before closing the door.

This is how it was always meant to be.

I slide into the driver's seat, the engine purring to life. The road ahead is dark and empty, a perfect void leading us to the safety of the place I've prepared for her.

She doesn't know it yet, but she'll be grateful. She'll remember. Then she'll see.

This world doesn't deserve her.

But I do.

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35

TAKESHI

It's the sunlight that wakes me.

It creeps over my eyelids, filtering in through the wide windows of the Ishida living room. A dull ache throbs in my neck, and I grimace, running a hand over my face as I sit up.

Apparently I fell asleep on the couch after talking to Hana on the phone. Great.

I roll my tight shoulders, my mind drifting to the conversation with my sister last night. The truth of it cuts deep: I shove it aside as I stand and stretch.

Fuck, I need coffee.

But first, I need Katarina.

I head back down the hall to our room. When I step inside, a quick glance shows the bed empty. The sheets are rumpled but cold, and there's no sign of her in the bathroom.

I glance at my phone. Later than I thought. She must already be out.

Her absence twists something in my gut, but I shake it off, my focus narrowing on what needs to be done today.

Proof.

Because two parts of me are at war with each other, and I need to settle things before they rip me apart.

One part wants to burn Kolya Ishida to the ground, leaving nothing but ashes. I've cherished that dream ever since I tracked Akira's last steps back to Kat's father, and stoked the fire with every memory of the mentor and friend I lost.

Akira was the only one who saw me for who I really was and didn't flinch. Where everyone else feared the darkness in me, he taught me to harness and channel it.

Kolya stole him from me.

That's not something I can forgive, no matter how much time passes.

Never mind the fact that my "way in" eventually became the whole fucking game.

Katarina.

She was just supposed to be a means to an end. Get close to Kolya through her. A clean, surgical infiltration of the Ishida-kai camp to extract the truth I needed and bring Kolya to his knees.

It didn't stay clean or surgical.

Because every time I look at her, half of me burns for revenge, for the justice I owe Akira. The other half burns for *her*.

Burns for the way she looks at me when she thinks I'm not paying attention, like I'm both the storm and her safe harbor from it. For the way her breath catches when I touch her, the way her strength falters for just a second before she lets it roar back to life.

She's my chaos and my control wrapped up together.

I need proof. Not for Kolya. Not even for Akira. For me.

And yet… What if Kolya *didn't* kill Akira, and I've been wrong all along?

Honestly, part of me truly hopes that's what I'll find. Used to be that all I wanted was revenge. Now I've found something much better. Something I

want even more.

The easiest path right now would be to let this lie. To walk away from the vengeance and the pain, and focus on her. Focus on the fact that she's here, and somehow mine.

But then I remember Akira's voice, his laugh, the way he believed in me when no one else did. He didn't just save me from myself—he built me. He deserves better than to be forgotten. He deserves justice.

And that's not something I can just walk away from.

So I'm stuck. Torn between the man who taught me to be what I am, and the woman who's showing me what I could be.

And proof is the only way out of this bullshit. The only way I can make sense of the chaos, and forgive myself for using the woman I now love.

I pause at the kitchen doorway, my eyes landing on Nina, seated at the breakfast bar with a cup of tea and a book. Her dark hair is pulled into a loose bun, and her sharp blue eyes flick up to meet mine.

"Morning," I growl as I approach.

She raises an eyebrow. "Morning."

For a second, I wonder if something is off with her. But then she smiles, looking at me curiously, and I shake the thought away.

Maybe it's just that I slept sitting up on a couch with my neck at a fucked-up angle and no Katarina curled against me.

"Have you seen Kat?"

Her face flickers again with that strange look, but she keeps her smile.

"No," she shrugs. "Have you?"

I shake my head as I walk over to the counter and pour myself some coffee. I take a sip, turning to glance back at Nina, who's returned to her book.

A spark of an idea ignites inside me, and my mind begins to do what it does best:

Scheme. Turn. Plot. Figure out the weaknesses in those around me and see how I can exploit them. I turn it off around my family, and those I love. But with other people?

It’s a lethal weapon.

The trick with Nina is subtlety. She’s loyal to Kolya in a way that only someone desperate to escape her horrific past could be. Yes, there's bad blood between her father and Kolya. But Kolya *saved her*. He plucked her from the wreckage of her own family and gave her a life far better than the one she fled. She owes him everything.

At least, that’s what she tells herself.

But everyone has cracks.

“Starting the day with a little light reading?” I ask, nodding toward her book.

“Something like that,” she replies, her voice polite but cool. She doesn’t lift her gaze.

Nothing unusual there. This is basically how Nina has been toward me ever since I stepped foot in this house. I don’t think she necessarily *dislikes* me —well, maybe a little, seeing as I *did* force a marriage to her best friend.

It's more that when she watches me, and thinks I don't realize it, she’s studying me with suspicion.

I have that effect on most people, though.

I move to the other side of the kitchen island and slide onto a stool, resting my forearms on the counter. “Tea and a book. Very civilized. Makes the rest of us look bad, though.”

“Some of us prefer not to thrive in chaos,” she says smoothly, turning a page.

“Fair enough,” I say with a faint smile, letting the silence hang between us for a beat before gesturing to the book. “Anything interesting?”

She sighs, setting the book down and finally meeting my gaze. “Do you *need* something, Takeshi?”

“Just making conversation,” I reply lightly, but letting a hint of seriousness creep into my tone. “Is that so bizarre?”

She squints slightly, suspicion flickering in her eyes. “It is with you.”

I chuckle softly. “Fair.” I glance at her tea, then back at her. “It’s nice here, isn’t it? Peaceful, even.”

“For now,” she replies, her voice wary.

“Well, that’s the trick with peace, isn’t it?” I muse, letting my words linger in the air. “It’s fragile. Always waiting for the next thing to shatter it.”

The walls around her rise even higher. “What are you getting at, Takeshi?”

I shrug, smiling. “Nothing. Just talking. Making conversation.”

“We barely ever have conversations.”

“All the more reason to fix that, no?”

She continues to peer at me cautiously. I lean back slightly, holding her gaze.

“You’ve been with Kolya a long time, Nina. You’ve seen how he handles... disruptions. How he ensures things stay peaceful. But you know as well as I do that peace comes at a cost. Someone has to pay. With money. Their life…” I shrug. “Their *family*…”

Her posture shifts, a flicker of unease in her expression. I say nothing more, letting her connect the dots on her own. When her fingers tighten on her book, I know I’ve hit the mark.

“I’m not a prisoner here,” she says suddenly, her voice almost defiant.

I tilt my head slightly, a small smile on my lips. “Did I say you were?”

“No,” she says sharply. “But you implied it.”

“Really?” I counter, my voice soft but pointed.

She stares at me for a long moment, and I can see the struggle in her eyes—between her loyalty to Kolya and the doubts she's never allowed herself to fully explore.

And just like that, the first crack appears.

"I think you are," I counter softly, studying her closely. "A prisoner, I mean. Your father was Kolya's enemy. Technically, you're Kolya's hostage. Call it what you want—guest, adopted family, whatever—it doesn't change that."

Her jaw clenches, her hands gripping the edges of the book. "I know what my family was," she snaps. "I know what they did. Kolya gave me a home. He treated me with respect in a way they didn't—"

"I'm not disputing that," I say, my voice steady. "But don't pretend he doesn't use you when it suits him. You think he keeps you here purely out of the goodness of his heart?"

Her glare sharpens. "I do," she snaps.

I lean forward slightly. "He's a brilliant man, Nina—ruthless, cunning, always thinking five steps ahead. That's why the Ishida-kai is so powerful. You don't imagine for a second that he doesn't see you as leverage?"

"I'm not *leverage*," she hisses, but there's hesitation now, the crack growing.

I lean back, giving her space. "You're a smart woman, Nina. You know what he's capable of. Hell, you've benefited from it. And you've also been shaped by it. Every decision he makes, every move, every word—it's calculated. Always."

"What's your point?" she asks quietly, her grip on the book loosening.

"My *point*," I say slowly, "is that no one is infallible—not even Kolya. And if you think he doesn't have secrets…dark ones…you're fooling yourself. I'm just saying, maybe it's time to stop assuming he's perfect."

She stares at me for a long time. I can see the wheels turning in her mind, the doubts I'm planting taking root. I just need her to lean in to that doubt a little more. Get a little closer.

“I need your help,” I say.

Her lips purse, and I can see the conflict in her eyes. Finally, she exhales deeply and sets down her cup.

“What do you need?”

I keep my expression neutral, though a surge of satisfaction races through me. “I’m looking for something regarding someone I used to know— a friend of mine who might have done business with Kolya.” My jaw tightens. “Business that may have gone…*badly*.”

She stiffens.

“Look, Nina, all I want is the truth. I’m not trying to use it, or make it something bigger, or even try to come for Kolya with it. I’m married to his daughter. That makes him and me family.”

It’s almost alarming to me how easily I can bend the truth sometimes, or falsify my own emotional state.

“I just want to know what happened to my friend. I’ve tried, but it’s like any mention of him has been erased from Kolya’s records.” I lean a little closer, lowering my voice conspiratorially and injecting a wistful, sad note into it. “Do you…I mean, is there *anywhere* he might hide his more…let's say… *jarring* records?”

Nina swallows, looking away, wetting her lips with her tongue.

“Nina,” I press quietly. “I know you’re happier here than you were with your birth family. But if you knew in your heart there was *something* off about how it all happened, and that there was an important piece of the puzzle missing, and then someone told you it was right there behind a locked door…” I reach out and lay a hand on one of hers. “Wouldn’t you want to open that door? Just to *know*? Because that’s how I feel about my missing friend. I just have to *know*.”

The kitchen goes utterly silent. Nina keeps her gaze averted. But I can see her breathing getting heavier, her throat working.

And then finally…*success*.

She turns to me slowly, her eyes flickering over my face. “There’s…a room in the basement,” she says quietly. She glances behind her, as if checking if we’re being watched or listened to. Then she slowly slides off of her stool. “Come with me,” she croaks quietly.

I bite back my triumphant grin.

I follow her through the house, down a staircase that leads to the finished basement. Through that, there’s another door leading down a much darker, narrower staircase to some sort of sub-basement. At the bottom, she stops in front of a scratched, battered steel door.

Nina nervously glances around, then taps a code into the keypad lock. The mechanism clicks, and the door creaks open.

“Be quick,” she mutters, moving aside to let me in.

I step into the room, eyes adjusting to the dim light. Shelves line the walls, filled with boxes and files. A desk sits in the center, its surface cluttered with papers and photographs. It’s exactly what I was hoping for.

And then before I can move further, I hear the sound of gun being cocked.

Shit.

I turn, coming face to face with Nina leveling a gun at me, her hands steady, her expression ice-cold.

“You really thought I’d betray Kolya?” she snaps, her voice sharp and furious, and maybe even a little amused. “I mean, are you fucking serious?”

She barks a cold laugh, shaking her head.

I don’t flinch, don’t move. My mind races, planning my next move.

“Killing me won’t solve anything,” I say calmly, meeting her gaze. “Would Kolya approve of you murdering his brand new son-in-law?”

Her grip on the gun tightens, her eyes blazing. “At the moment, all signs point to *yes*,” she snarls. “Now where the *fuck* is Katarina?”

Her words slam into me like a freight train.

“What?”

“*Where is she*?!” Nina shouts, her voice cracking.

My stomach plummets. I take a slow step forward, my hands raised in a gesture of appeal. “Nina, I—”

A shadow moves behind her. We’re no longer alone.

Kolya levels a merciless stare at me, his gray eyes brimming with cold fury, silvered hair pulled back and a *very* sharp looking katana in his hand.

“Well done, Nina,” he growls quietly.

My jaw sets. “Where the fuck is Kat—”

“That’s what I'd like to know,” Kolya says icily.

He rests the tip of his sword against my jugular with the practiced ease of a surgeon.

“Where the *fuck* is my daughter,” he whispers venomously.

“I *don’t know*,” I snarl. “If she’s missing, we need to—”

Two other armed men suddenly appear, guns drawn.

“Take him to the room,” Kolya growls as he lowers the blade. His men grab me, yanking my arms behind my back and cuffing them, Nina’s gun still trained on my face.

“*You’re making a mistake*,” I growl at Kolya.

He smiles coldly. “Well, by the time I’m done with you, Takeshi, we’ll know for certain, won't we. Along with every fucking secret you’ve ever had.”

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36

KATARINA

THE DARKNESS IS SUFFOCATING.

The air smells of dust and something faintly sweet, like dead, drying flowers in a vase.

When my eyes finally open, the soft glow of the single lamp on a side table barely penetrates the gloom.

I blink, my head throbbing as my vision adjusts, taking in my surroundings.

I'm in an old-fashioned living room—huge to the point of being cavernous, like something out of a Gilded Age home. Vast shelves full of dusty leather-bound books fill the walls, the air thick with cobwebs. Gray sheets drape over everything, including the couch I'm lying on, everything ghostly in the dim light.

Silence surrounds me, thick and disorienting.

I scramble shakily off the couch, my mind screaming at me to move. I realize I'm barefoot when my toes touch the cold, uneven floorboards. But I don't dwell on that.

All I can think about is *him*.

The man who took me. Who emerged from the night and—

My mind glitches. I *swear,* his face was so familiar…one I should remember. It made me feel like I was staring at someone I knew. But now,

the memory is distorted and the familiarity has melted back to dark terror in my head.

Whoever he is, he jumped me, drugged me, and—I assume—brought me here. And wherever *here* is, I need to get out.

I dart toward the nearest door, my pulse thundering in my ears. I try the brass doorknob, but it doesn't budge. I jiggle it harder, panic rising in my chest.

Locked.

I whirl, my eyes darting to another door on the opposite side of the room. I stumble toward it, my legs still wobbly, and try again.

Also locked.

No, *no*, *no*, I think urgently, my hands trembling as I move to the tall, arched windows framed by heavy, moth-eaten drapes. The glass panes overlook an overgrown garden, dark and shapeless in the night. I push on the window, but it doesn't give. My fingers scrape at the edges, looking for a latch, anything.

My chest heaves as frustration and fear swell inside me. My reflection in the glass stares back at me, pale and frantic, my hair a tangled mess.

Yeah, fuck this.

I turn, scanning the room for something I can use to smash the window. Just then, a sound behind me freezes me in place. My head snaps around as the first door I tried slowly creaks open.

Holy fuck.

Raw, naked fear stabs into me as *he* steps into the room, his presence filling it like night swallowing the last light of day. His movements are slow and deliberate, and the soft glow from the one lamp glints across the surface of his mask.

A grotesque, grinning *oni* face stares back at me, its features twisted and monstrous. His eyes are hidden by it, but I can feel his gaze on me, heavy and unwavering.

And again, even though I can’t see his face, there’s that nagging familiarity…as if that brief memory of his face when he first surprised me is returning.

Then it disappears again, swirling back into the black fog.

“Finally,” he rasps, his voice rough and uneven, dragged over gravel. “I have you back.”

My heart stops. The room tilts, and I stumble back a step until I hit the edge of the draped couch I woke up on. My muscles coil, preparing to bolt, although I know there’s nowhere to run.

He shuts the door behind him and advances on me slowly, like a predator savoring the chase. His head tilts as he studies me, a gloved hand trailing along the back of a sheet-covered chair. He sighs, the sound eerily content. “You’re just as I remember, Marianna.”

The name slams into me like a punch, stealing the air from my lungs.

That was my mother’s name.

He takes another step closer, his voice soft but determined. “This time, Marianna,” he murmurs, his tone filled with unhinged reverence, “they’ll never take you from me.”

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TAKESHI

THE AIR in the room is cold, biting against my bare skin.

The sizzling wrought iron poker in Kolya's hand is another thing altogether.

I watch grimly as he twists the poker, letting it turn white-hot as he holds it to the flame of the blowtorch. The room smells of rust and disinfectant. A single bulb swings above us, casting shifting shadows over the concrete walls.

I'm chained to a chair, my wrists and ankles bound, rivulets of sweat running down my shirtless back despite the chill.

Seemingly satisfied with how hot the poker is now, Kolya turns to stand before me, calm and composed. His eyes burn with the cold fury that only a father knows when his child is in danger.

Four of his men are in here, too. But they stand to the side, watching.

This is Kolya's show.

And I'm the main attraction.

Nina sits in the corner, her expression blank, a stillness in her posture that suggests she's perfectly fine letting this happen.

"You don't want to do this," I mutter, my voice hoarse but steady.

Kolya tilts his head, considering. Then he steps closer, the glowing iron hissing as it cuts through the air. "Until I know where my daughter is," he

says evenly, “and what you’ve done to her, and if she’s been harmed, there is *no limit* to what I want to do to you, Mr. Mori.”

I keep my expression neutral even as my muscles tighten against the inevitable. “I didn’t take her. In fact, I need you to let me the fuck out of here so I can go *find her*,” I snarl viciously.

Kolya doesn’t respond. He just lifts the poker higher, its glow reflected in his cold, calculating eyes. “Now might be a good time to tell you,” he murmurs, “that I have ears all over my house. I heard your conversation last night with your sister.”

He’s bluffing. He has to be.

Kolya leans closer, the iron red-hot between us. His lips curl into something that isn’t quite a smile. “The plan was always the same, was it, Takeshi? Use Katarina to get inside the Ishida-kai?”

My own words hit me like a punch to the face.

So much for my theory he was bluffing.

“You heard that?” I growl.

Kolya doesn’t flinch. “I did.”

“Then you *also* heard me say I’m in love with your daughter.”

“I’ve heard you say all kinds of bullshit since you wormed your way into this house,” he replies coldly. “Attempting to sway my men’s loyalty, trying to insert yourself into my affairs. Now,” he murmurs darkly, easing the poker closer to my bare chest. “*Where. Is. She.*”

“If I knew were Katarina was right now,” I seethe, “there would be nothing on this Earth stopping me from breaking out of this chair and—”

The iron jabs into my side, instantly searing my skin and sending pain flooding through my body. I bite back a scream, my jaw tightening, eyes blazing as I glare at him.

“WHERE IS MY DAUGHTER?” Kolya roars.

“*I love her*!” I snarl back at him, the words torn from me.

Kolya touches the iron to my side again, the scent of burning flesh filling the room. My vision swims, but I don't look away. "I'm love with her!" I bellow, my voice raw. "I'm fucking in love with her, you motherfucker!"

Another jab of the iron, this time to my shoulder. The pain is indescribable, but I don't break. I refuse.

Kolya's rage is barely contained. "Why did you worm your way into my home? And do not lie to me," he warns, his voice deathly calm. He sets the poker down and reaches for a katana resting on a nearby table, its razor-sharp blade glinting in the dim light as he unsheathes it.

I meet his gaze, chest heaving, body trembling in pain. "*Answers*," I rasp. "I wanted answers. And vengeance. Not against Katarina. Against *you*."

For a moment, the room feels even colder. "Why would you seek vengeance against me?" he demands, his grip tightening on the sword's hilt.

"Because you killed Akira Ohno," I say, my voice steady despite the pain.

The name hangs heavily in the air. Kolya's brow furrows, his expression shifting from rage to confusion. "I don't know who that is."

"Bullshit!" I snap. "You knew before, at the hospital. I could tell."

Kolya shakes his head slowly, his frown deepening. "No. The name made me think of someone else, that's all."

My frustration bubbles over. "Akira was my friend and mentor. He taught me everything. He made me the man I am. He was like *family*," I seethe. "And then, when he came back to visit Japan, he crossed you, and you *killed* him."

Kolya shakes his head. "Your information is incorrect. You've wasted your time, and probably your life, trying to infiltrate my home and my family," he growls.

"This can stop right now," Nina spits, standing and storming over to me, dark fury clouding her face. "*Please*, Takeshi. Kolya's telling you to your face that your information on this Akira person is wrong. So there's no reason for you to keep us from Kat—"

“YOU are the ones keeping us from her!” I roar, making her take a step back as I lurch against my binds. “By keeping me here! She’s out there, and we are *wasting fucking time*!!”

“Fuck you!” Nina screams. She jams her hand into her pocket and yanks out two little white envelopes with gold trim. “Stop fucking lying, you manipulative psycho!”

She rips open one of the envelopes and yanks out a white card before shoving it in my face. I frown, my eyes struggling to read the too-close handwritten words in heavy black ink.

You’re mine.

My frown deepens as my eyes drag from the card to Nina’s furious face.

“What the fuck is this?”

“I found them in her room!” she snaps, her voice shaking. “I *know* this is your doing!”

She jams the other card in my face. This one reads *Still mine*.

“Nina—”

I grunt as her hand slaps my face hard. “Where the *fuck* is my friend!!?” she screeches. “Where the *fuck* is—”

“Nina.”

Kolya’s voice is low, but it silences her instantly. There’s a rawness in his eyes as he reaches down and plucks the cards from where Nina’s hurled them onto my lap.

He reads the cards, again and again, his eyes widening as they drag over the ink.

“I know this handwriting,” he says quietly.

His throat works as he pulls his phone out of his suit pocket. He thumbs through it, frowning, before he looks up at me.

“Is this your friend?” he murmurs, turning the phone around to face me.

My heart stops.

It’s Akira.

Akira as I remember him—young, cocky, and smug, standing beside a motorcycle with a lopsided grin on his face.

My throat tightens as I nod. “*Yes*,” I hiss.

Kolya exhales, his shoulders sagging slightly. He turns to his men. “Cut him loose.”

The guards exchange unsure glances.

“*Now*,” he snarls.

They move quickly, releasing me from the chair, but I don’t move, my eyes locked on Kolya.

“Your friend isn’t dead, Takeshi.”

Something claws inside me, choking my breath.

“That man,” Kolya says quietly, “is my brother. Jin Ishida.”

The room spins as the weight of his words crashes over me. “*What the fuck did you just say*?” I whisper.

Kolya’s eyes are tense as they meet mine.

“Can you walk?” he growls. “I need you to come with me right now.”

My mouth thins. “This concerns Katarina?”

“It…might,” Kolya growls.

I lurch to my feet. “Then I can fucking *run*.”

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TAKESHI

THE CAR ROARS through the neon-lit streets of Tokyo, the city a blur of light and shadow beyond the tinted windows. Kolya's hands, strong and tattooed, are tight fists on his knees as he sits beside me in the back seat, his face a mask of grim determination.

His voice breaks the heavy silence. “Where and when did you meet my brother?”

“England,” I murmur, looking out the window. “Ten, twelve years ago. Through my mother's social circles. He became a sort of mentor to me when I was a teenager.” My jaw tightens, the memory bittersweet as I turn toward Kolya. “He was also my friend.”

Kolya nods, his expression grim.

“My brother has experienced…problems with his mental health,” Kolya mutters slowly, as if forcing the words out costs him. “He’s suffered from psychosis and paranoid schizophrenia since we were children. He had it under control for a while. He was on the right meds.” His voice becomes almost hesitant. “But right around the time my wife Marianna became pregnant with Katarina, Jin said he needed a change of scenery. He left Japan, moved to the UK, and sort of fell off my radar. He was there for years; we lost touch for many of them.”

My brow furrows. “Why the different name?”

Kolya smirks privately. “Akira Ohno?” he murmurs, shaking his head. “No idea. Probably wanted to distance himself from the Ishida name. But I *can* tell you how he picked his new name.”

He sighs as he turns to me.

“Do you watch anime, Takeshi?”

“Excuse me?”

“Japanese animation. I don’t mean Pokémon. The more…adult versions.”

I lift a shoulder. “Sometimes.”

“Are you familiar with the movie *Akira*, about the outlaw young man who races motorcycles around a future Tokyo?”

I *have* seen that movie. And suddenly, it clicks.

Akira.

The man who lived and breathed motorcycles, who gave me my love for them, took his new name from a movie about a kid who loves motorcycles.

Holy shit.

It’s so obvious and simple that it almost makes me want to laugh.

Almost.

“And Ohno…” Kolya smiles a rare smile, shaking his head. “That was a nickname we had for him growing up.” He turns to me. “Jin was…accident prone. Or maybe trouble-prone. And whenever he’d mess up, my mother would say ‘oh no’ in English.”

My mouth falls open. “He returned to Japan when Marianna…got sick,” Kolya continues. His voice tightens, but he keeps going. “She died not long after Jin came home. It was strange: they weren’t that close, but Jin took her death very hard. He wasn’t ever the same. His moods spiraled, his mental health crumbled. He stopped taking his meds and started trying to fix things with drugs and alcohol instead.”

Kolya grits his jaw as he glances at me. “I tried to help him. I even put him in a facility, hoping they could help him. But it got worse. He became… volatile.”

“So these notes,” I growl. “To Katarina. They're from him?”

Kolya nods curtly. “That’s his handwriting. I'd know it anywhere.”

My blood runs cold. “Do you think he took her?”

Kolya hesitates, but then he shakes his head. “It’s impossible.”

“And why the fuck is that?” I snarl, leaning forward. “Why—”

Kolya cuts me off, his voice firm. “Jin hasn’t left his apartment in almost a decade.”

My mouth opens, but no words come out.

Kolya exhales heavily, shaking his head. “Jin is a *hikikomori*—a hermit. The fact that he hasn’t once in ten years left the apartment I bought him is *his* decision. He has food and supplies delivered whenever he wants. He has my number. He can always come out. He just chooses not to.”

The car slows and pulls up to the curb. Kolya’s face is grim as he turns and glances out the window.

“We’re here.”

* * *

“KOLYA-SAMA.”

At the front door, a man in a dark suit bows low to Kolya.

“Has anyone been to see him?”

The man frowns. “Sir, he…” He clears his throat and shakes his head. “He never has visitors.”

Kolya grunts. “We’re going up. Stay here.”

The guard steps aside and we move into the building. A second guard is stationed by the elevator, his posture rigid, his hand resting gently near the hilt of a katana under his suit jacket. Kolya doesn't so much as glance at him as we pass, but the tension in his bearing is palpable.

The elevator ride up is silent. Kolya stares straight ahead, his face reflected in the polished steel doors grim and unyielding. I want to ask him more about Akira—about *Jin*.

All I can think about is Katarina.

"We're here for a reason, Takeshi," Kolya growls. "Believe me, I want to be out there looking for her as much as you do. But—"

"But there's a thread here that needs pulling," I finish, my voice edged.

Kolya nods as the elevator door opens. "In ten years, Jin has never once called me, or sent a text, or a letter, even a simple note." He turns to me. "But he's sent notes to Katarina before. Small ones, just saying hello, or that he was thinking of her. But those two in the white envelopes?" He grimaces. "Those are…"

"Not the sort of notes an uncle sends his niece," I murmur.

"No, Mr. Mori," Kolya says darkly. "No, they're not."

Another of Kolya's men bows formally as we exit the elevator. Another stands at the far end, positioned outside the apartment door. His gaze flicks to Kolya, then to me, as we approach.

"Leave us," Kolya growls.

The guard bows and retreats down the hall to join the man by the elevators.

Kolya exhales slowly, then raps his knuckles on the door. "Jin," he says, his tone surprisingly gentle. "It's me. I know it's been a long, long time, but we need to talk about something."

Silence.

Kolya knocks again, harder this time. "Jin. I know you're in there. I'm not angry, we just need to talk about Katarina."

Still nothing.

Kolya’s hand clenches into a tight fist. “She’s in trouble, brother,” he presses, his voice strained. “I need your help. Please.”

The seconds stretch into an unbearable eternity. My pulse pounds in my ears, a steady drumbeat of dread. Finally, Kolya steps back, his face hardening to stone.

“Enough fucking around,” he growls, pulling a gun from his holster.

“Smartest thing I’ve heard all night,” I mutter darkly.

I kick the door in, the wood splintering under the force. The sound echoes sharp and jarring down the corridor. We step inside with weapons drawn.

There’s a single light on in the living room, but the air inside is musty and stale.

The apartment is silent and meticulously tidy, but devoid of life. Dust is everywhere and the faint scent of decay lingers in the air. It’s as if the space itself has been suspended in time, forgotten by the world.

Kolya’s eyes dart around. “Jin?” he calls out, his voice firm but wary. No response.

I move toward the kitchen, my gun at the ready. The cabinets are fully stocked and the fridge hums quietly, but everything feels wrong. Too tidy. Staged.

“He’s not here,” I say tightly.

Kolya grits his teeth before suddenly storming through the apartment. I follow, checking each room. A bedroom with a neatly made bed. A bathroom with clean, folded towels. A study with shelves filled with books on engineering and philosophy.

No Jin.

Then I notice it: an open window in the back room, its curtains fluttering gently in the breeze. My stomach drops as I approach, my gaze going to the rope ladder leading to the courtyard below.

“Kolya.”

There’s no answer when I call his name.

“Kolya.”

I frown as I turn.

“Kolya?”

The hairs on the back of my neck stand up as I prowl back through the apartment, checking every empty room again before I step into a small office. Kolya stands frozen in the center, his gaze fixed on the far wall. When I turn to see what he’s looking at, my soul goes numb.

Holy fucking hell.

The wall is covered in photographs. Dozens of them, maybe hundreds.

Every single one is of Katarina.

Some are recent and taken from a distance while others are older, grainy images that look like they were pulled from family albums. Then there are the words, scrawled across the pictures or on the wall around them like hand-drawn frames, in bold, jagged letters:

Marianna.

Mine. Always mine.

My love.

Kolya’s face is a mask of controlled fury. I step closer, scanning the monstrous collage. The sheer intensity of the obsession is suffocating. My own anger flares, hot and blinding.

“Whatever part of this fucked-up family saga you haven’t yet told me…” I growl carefully, turning to level a cold glare at Kolya. “I need to hear it, *now*.”

He nods, his face grim.

“Jin was in love with Marianna,” he says bluntly. “The irony, of course, is that *I* wasn’t. We married merely to increase the strength of the empire I’d just wrested from my grandfather’s control. Honestly, we could barely stand each other. But Jin?” He shakes his head slowly, still staring at the wall of madness.

“Jin always loved her. I know that’s why he left when Katarina was conceived. Why he came back when Marianna got sick. And why he lost whatever shred of control he had over his demons when she died.”

We stand there in stunned silence for another minute, staring at the collage of photos.

“Kolya,” I growl quietly. “What did your wife look like?”

He lifts his arm, pointing at a smiling photo of Katarina.

“Like that,” he growls. “Katarina looks *exactly* like her mother.”

It’s the last piece of a puzzle we’ve been dreading putting together.

I turn to Kolya, nostrils flaring. “Do you have *any* idea where Jin might be?”

He nods as he turns to me.

“He’s going to be at the only other place he’s ever called home.”

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39

KATARINA

I SIT on the edge of the sheet-covered couch, my arms wrapped around me in an attempt to shield me from the terror clawing at my chest.

The room I'm imprisoned in still reeks. But at least I'm alone now. The man in the *oni* mask left a while ago, telling me in his rough voice he'd be back with "presents" for me.

I hug my knees tighter to my chest, shuddering.

The past hours—days?—blur together in a confused haze. The living room feels like is a tomb, frozen in time. Cobwebs drape the corners. Outside, through the grimy windows, I can make out a tall, menacing hedge beyond the overgrown garden, a dark green wall further boxing me into this prison.

I've been trying to keep it together and focus on staying calm, but the fear inside me is a living, breathing thing, and Takeshi's face keeps flashing through my mind.

His words.

That *fucking* phone call.

The betrayal slices into me afresh every time I think of it, but, weirdly, alongside the heartbreak is the unshakable need for him to find me and prove me wrong.

Please. Tell me I was crazy. Tell me I heard incorrectly.

Even if that’s a lie.

The click of the lock snaps me to attention. My heart lurches and I jerk around, my muscles tensing. The door creaks open, and the masked man steps in.

“Marianna,” he murmurs in that raspy voice that sounds like it hasn't been used for years.

Why does he keep calling me that?

He doesn’t approach. He watches me like I'm fragile and could break or bolt at any second. I lift my hands, signing sharply and frantically.

“What do you want from me?”

It’s futile. I quickly realized the last time he was here that he doesn’t understand sign language. Just like last time, he doesn’t respond to my question. His head tilts slightly, his features hidden behind that grotesque mask.

“Your voice will return, Marianna,” he says gently, almost reassuringly. “You’ve just forgotten how to use it. I almost forgot how to use mine for a long time, too.”

It hits me.

He thinks I’m my mother.

This man isn’t just insane. He’s delusional.

“But all that matters now, my love,” he murmurs, “is that I rescued you from that monster.”

My stomach knots.

“That *person* you had to pretend was your husband.”

I just stare at him.

“Here,” he continues, reaching into his pocket. He pulls out a phone and walks toward me, holding it out like a peace offering. I shy away and he slows his movements, putting the phone on a side table before retreating

back across the room. “Just look, my love. Even Kolya knows he’s no good.”

I hesitate before walking over and picking up the phone with trembling fingers. I tap the play button on the still image on the screen, and a grainy video begins to run.

My chest tightens.

The video shows Papa standing in front of Takeshi, who’s shirtless, chained to a chair, and writhing in agony. The red-hot iron in my father’s hand glows menacingly as he presses it to Takeshi’s side. The roar of pain that tears from Takeshi's throat rips at me like a knife to the chest, making me physically recoil.

The video starts to play again on a loop, but I lower the phone from my gaze, nausea writhing inside me.

I might hate him right now for using and betraying me. But that still doesn’t mean I can watch him in pain like this, helpless to stop it.

“You see, my love?” the masked man growls. “He is a bad man. And Kolya will deal with him.”

I say nothing. But when I glance back at the phone, my thumb accidentally swipes the screen. It flicks to another video, this one with the thumbnail image suggesting it was shot right after the one I just watched.

“WHERE IS MY DAUGHTER?” Papa roars loudly on-screen.

“*I love her*,” Takeshi hurls back, the words so pure and true that it breaks my heart.

Papa jabs the iron to his side again, making me flinch, my hand flying to my mouth.

“What are you watching?” the masked man across the room suddenly growls, realizing that the video has switched. “Stop that!” he blurts roughly. “Not that one!”

I can’t look away. Takeshi writhes in pain on the screen as my father tortures him. But through it all, his voice rings out loud and clear.

“I’m in love with her!” Takeshi roars, his voice raw. “I’m fucking in love with her, you motherfucker!”

“Put that down, Marianna!” the masked man bellows.

I keep watching.

“Why did you worm your way into my home?” Papa hisses. “And do not lie to me!”

“*Answers*,” Takeshi spits out. “I wanted answers. And vengeance. Not against Katarina. Against *you*.”

“Why would you seek vengeance against me?” Papa hurls back.

“Because you killed Akira Ohno.”

I jolt abruptly as the masked man violently rips the phone from my hands. It clatters to the ground and I stagger back, my wide, terrified gaze wrenching to his.

He takes a menacing step toward me, chest heaving, making me back away until I hit the bookshelves behind me. For a moment, I think he might lash out. But then suddenly he stops, his hand trembling slightly.

“No. *No*,” he chokes. “Marianna, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to frighten you.”

My throat works, fear coursing through my veins as he tips his head to the side.

“It’s just… You shouldn’t listen to his lies anymore. We have each other now. You’re free.”

He lifts his hands to the mask.

“See?”

The mask pulls away, and my blood turns to ice.

What.

The.

Actual.

FUCK.

Everything twists inside me. The world around me shimmers and bends, like it's not real.

It *can't* be real.

"Marianna…" my uncle says quietly, his face lined, older than I remember, twisting in anguish as he looks at me.

All the air leaves my lungs.

Jin Ishida locked himself away from the world over a decade ago. He doesn't leave his apartment.

Doesn't kidnap people.

Doesn't think his *own niece* is his dead sister-in-law. "We're in my grandfather's house," he murmurs, gesturing around the room. "Kolya hated this house, just like he hated Grandpa. But I didn't. I always liked it here." His voice drops. "We'll live here now, Marianna. Together. They'll never find us."

My mind races as he speaks, his words devolving into delusional ramblings. I need to escape, but brute force won't work. He's taller, stronger, and clearly deranged.

"You've been gone so long," he says suddenly, his voice filled with sadness. "But you're here now. That's all that matters."

He steps closer. Every instinct screams at me to bolt, but I stay where I am, steeling myself.

If he thinks I'm my mother, he doesn't think I could pose a threat.

That's my advantage.

His gloved hand lifts, brushing a stray strand of hair from my face. I flinch, and his head tips.

"Everything will be perfect now, you'll see."

He reaches for my hand.

And that’s when I make my move.

My years of martial arts training kick in as I lunge forward, grab his arm, push past him, and then use the momentum of my body dropping to the ground to fling him over my shoulder.

He crashes to the ground with a guttural roar. My bare feet are already pounding on the floor as I bolt for the door.

He calls after me but I ignore him, adrenaline pushing me forward. I wrench the door open and sprint into the hallway, my heart pounding like a war drum.

“Marianna!” Behind me, his footsteps thunder after me, heavy and relentless.

I run blindly through the old house, my lungs burning with the effort. I spot a flight of stairs and take them down two at a time. I ignore the cold wood biting into my feet. My only thoughts are of escape.

Escape, or die. Or—something worse.

I bolt across a marble foyer, then burst through a creaky set of double doors into the yard. The air is cold and sharp, night cloaking everything in shadow with a nearly full moon wrapping everything in a ghostly white shroud.

Ahead of me is the overgrown garden, and past that the towering hedge wall, which now that I'm closer I see has a single “doorway” in the middle of it.

That’s my escape.

I sprint toward it, desperation urging me forward. The hedge swallows me up as I enter, the branches clawing at my skin. It’s not until I’ve gone a few steps and am faced with a t-junction that I realize just how wrong I was.

This isn’t a passage leading me to freedom.

It’s a fucking *maze*.

Panic grips me as I look left, then right, my heart pounding.

“You can’t run from me, Marianna!” Jin bellows. “We’re meant to be together!”

I whirl, naked fear clawing up my throat as I hear him right behind me. He follows me through the entrance, his eyes locked on me.

Well, not going that way.

I spin, and without thinking, I bolt to my right.

Blindly.

Heedlessly.

If I want to live, I have to run.

I sprint down one length of the maze before hooking right and bolting down *that* passageway. The hedges are thick and gnarled, and they tower over me, easily three times my height.

Gasping, I crash out of the passageway and into a moonlit clearing. There's an empty stone fountain with a cherub on a Greek column in the middle of it, covered with a dead, gnarled rose bush.

My heart pounds in my chest as I stop to catch my breath for a second. My skin throbs. Adrenaline screams through my veins.

“*Marianna*!”

His voice is far too close for comfort.

I have to keep going.

Run.

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TAKESHI

THE CAR ROLLS to a stop outside the sprawling, decaying mansion just outside Tokyo. The house's silhouette looms spectrally against the dark sky.

The air is heavy with damp earth and the stench of rotting vegetation. I step out, my feet crunching against the gravel as I glance up at the gloomy, crumbling, European-style home.

Ivy snakes up the stone walls, shutters hang loose. The structure itself seems to sag under the weight of time.

“What is this place?” I growl as I turn to Kolya.

He doesn’t look at me as he answers, his gaze remaining fixed on the mansion.

“This was my grandfather’s house.” His tone is clipped, the muttered words laced with disdain. “He built it to escape the chaos of the city.”

I've heard what happened later. How a young Kolya, forged in hardship in brutal Northeastern Russia, returned to Japan after the death of his parents. How Kolya killed his grandfather—the man who banished his mother for falling in love with a foreigner—and reclaimed the empire that was his birthright.

I frown as I study the building. “Why keep it standing all these years, though? Why not just tear it down?”

Kolya’s lips curl into a humorless smile. “Destruction is too quick. Too merciful. I want it to rot. To crumble, piece by piece. I want to spend decades watching it collapse into nothing.” He turns to me, eyes cold. “*That* is my true revenge.”

The chill prickling up my spine has nothing to do with the night air. “You really think they’re here?”

“Yes. Jin loved this house. He…*admired* our grandfather in ways I never understood. If he’s not in his apartment, this is where he’d go.”

We should wait for backup. But the thought of Katarina in Jin’s hands makes the idea of delaying unbearable. Kolya’s driver, Mitsugi, steps forward, his hand resting on his sidearm. Kolya nods to him, then to me.

“Ready?” he asks, his voice steady despite the tension radiating off him.

I draw my gun and check the chamber. “Let’s go.”

The three of us slowly approach the front door. As we get closer, I stop abruptly and hold up a hand.

Something’s wrong.

The front door is wide open.I glance at Kolya. Just then, a voice roars from the shadows behind us, deep, rasping, and filled with madness.

“Marianna!”

The three of us whirl, guns lifted. My pulse spikes and Kolya’s expression hardens as he turns in the direction of the voice.

“Through there,” I murmur, nodding to an opening in the hedge. The faint rustle of leaves carries on the wind, almost lost in the stillness. Kolya nods grimly.

“Be warned,” he mutters. “This isn’t just a hedge. It’s an old garden maze.” His jaw grinds. “My grandfather had this whole place built to mimic a sprawling *chateau* in France.”

Fuck.

Picking our way through a dark, overgrown maze looking for the crazy motherfucker who thinks Kat is his old crush and in all likelihood kidnapped her sounds like a terrible idea.

But right now, I'd crawl over broken glass and through hellfire to save her.

The maze rises before us, dark and foreboding. The towering walls twist and writhe above us in the dim moonlight. My gut churns as we step inside: almost immediately the path splits, forcing a decision. Just then, Jin's voice roars out from the night around us.

"Marianna!" he calls again. "Don't run, my love! We can be together now!"

Rage sinks into me when I hear him call her that.

My love.

It makes me want to kill. At the same time, it sparks something akin to hope within me.

He said "don't run". I turn and glance back through the maze entrance across the stone driveway, to where the front door of the house is standing wide open.

Kolya and I exchange a look.

"She got away from him," he growls quietly.

I nod grimly. Yeah, that's what it looks like. But that means she's in a fucking maze, running through the dark from a fucking psychopath.

Kolya starts to step forward. But then he grimaces, raw agony rippling over his features. The pain from his surgery is slowing him down, even if he'll

never admit it.

“You shouldn’t even be walking around,” I growl. “Your stitches—”

“This is *my daughter*,” Kolya snaps, his eyes blazing. “If you think I’ll sit by like an invalid, you’re a fucking idiot.”

I nod, looking at the maze. “Fair enough. Are there any other exits?”

“No,” Kolya shakes his head. “Not that I can remember.”

“Good.” I glance at him. “Stay here and guard the entrance. If either of them tries to get out, you’ll see them first.”

Kolya hesitates, then nods decisively. “Be careful.”

Without another word, Mitsugi and I head into the maze. I go left, he turns right.

The darkness is overwhelming, moonlight barely filtering through the dense foliage of the overgrown shrubbery above. My grip tightens on my gun, my senses on high alert. Every step forward feels like I’m walking deeper into an ethereal darkness, the narrow paths twisting unpredictably, the hedges pressing closer .

“Marianna!” Jin’s voice echoes again, distant, unhinged. “Come back!”

The madness in his tone makes me pick up the pace, adrenaline surging as I round each bewildering corner. The maze is disorienting, the paths winding and endless, twisting at odd, random angles. My pulse roars in my ears, every shadow setting my nerves on edge.

My heart leaps into my throat when a gunshot shatters the silence, followed by another. Then a third, together with a grunt of pain. I break into a run, my breath ragged as I navigate the labyrinth, my sense of direction completely gone. I dodge left and right, trying to home in on the source.

When I finally burst into a small clearing, the sight stops me cold. Mitsugi lies spread-eagled on the ground, blood pooling beneath him. His lifeless eyes stare up at the sky, his face frozen in an expression of shock.

“Takeshi!” Kolya roars from the distance, his voice filled with urgency.

“It’s Mitsugi!” I yell back, my voice raw. Crouching by the body, I check for a pulse I know I won’t find. The body is still warm, but he’s gone, his neck sliced clean across and a stab wound through his chest.

There's a faint rustle behind me. I spin, gun raised, just as a blade splits the air. I throw myself to the side, the weapon slicing through the empty space where I’d just been standing. A figure lunges at me and I fire, the gunshot deafening. The shadow recoils, darting into the darkness of the maze.

“Fuck!” I hiss, pushing to my feet and bolting after him.

My legs burn as I sprint after him, my breath uneven. The narrow paths twist and turn, stray branches from the hedges clawing at me as I move. I round a corner, my eyes scanning wildly.

He’s gone.

The silence closes in again, oppressive and smothering.

I have to find her before that maniac does.

…And something tells me I’m running out of time.

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KATARINA

GUNSHOTS PIERCE THE SILENCE, shattering the night. My pulse slams against my ribs as I skid to a stop, whirling toward the sound.

The gun goes off again. Then suddenly, I hear it.

“Takeshi!”

My heart lurches.

It’s my father’s voice, calling for the man I love.

For a second my mind can’t even process it, cannot accept it’s actually happening.

“It’s Mitsugi!” Takeshi roars back.

Hope blooms in my chest like a flower desperately clawing its way up through cracks in the pavement.

They’re here. My father and Takeshi are *here*.

Hearing my father was one thing. But the dark tone of Takeshi’s voice hits me like a bolt of lightning, electrifying every nerve in my body. The words themselves barely register: all I can focus on is that Takeshi is *here*, so close, just beyond the twisting paths of this hellish maze.

“Fuck!” Takeshi’s roar and then a grunt slice through the air, chilling me to my bones. I don’t hesitate, just bolt forward, sprinting toward the sound, my

legs pumping furiously as dry leaves and brittle twigs crunch beneath my feet.

I hear Takeshi yell again, his voice extending through the darkness like a lifeline.

I run harder, faster, the blood pounding in my ears so hard it almost drowns out the sound of him. He's so close now I can hear his footsteps crunching through the leaves. My chest burns with the effort but I push through, my desperation to reach him eclipsing everything else.

I want to scream his name. I've wished for my voice back for *years*, for a thousand different reasons, sometimes so badly I can taste it on my tongue.

But I've never wanted it back more than I do right now.

The moonlight filters weakly through the hedges, casting eerie shadows that dance along the narrow paths. I rush forward as I hear him call my name again, closer this time.

Really close.

Hope explodes in my chest as I bolt forward, lurching toward the direction of his voice.

"KAT!" He roars again. "KAT, I'm here!"

He's so close he must be just around the next corner; that thought alone propels me on. I swerve left, my heart leaping at the idea of finally seeing him—

A hand clamps over my mouth.

A silent scream lodges in my throat, muffled by the iron grip of Jin's hand. His other arm snakes around my waist, pinning me to him as he yanks me off my feet. My legs flail uselessly, my breath coming in frantic, panicky gasps.

"*There* you are, my love," Jin growls, his voice darkly possessive. "You're safe now."

Fear explodes through my body in icy waves as he carries me, his steps steady and deliberate. I thrash against him, kicking the air, clawing at his arms, but his grip is unyielding, and his strength unnerving.

Jin turns a corner, emerging into the clearing I saw before with the crumbling fountain at its center, the cherub atop it eerily frozen in mid-laugh. Dead rose bushes coil around the base of the column like skeletal, thorny fingers.

Jin carries me across the clearing and stops at a low hedge, setting me down with a gentleness that feels grotesque given the situation.

“You’ll be safe here, my love,” he murmurs, pulling out a length of rope and swiftly binding my wrists with practiced, efficient movement, as if he’s done this before. “Let me take care of the monsters for you.”

I struggle against the ropes, watching him knot them tightly, my heart racing. *No*, I scream in my mind, tears burning my eyes. *Takeshi is here. My father is here. I have to get to them.*

Jin finishes tying my wrists and then knotting the free end around a crumbling stone bench. He steps back, as if admiring his handiwork.

“You’ve always been so beautiful, Marianna,” he whispers, his voice softening as he brushes a strand of hair out of my face. I flinch, nausea churning in my stomach. “I won’t let anyone take you from me this time, I swear.”

He stands abruptly, his gaze hardening as he looks toward the maze. “I’ll deal with them,” he says, his voice low and dangerous. “Then I'll be back.”

As he strides away, panic crashes over me in a tidal wave as I twist and pull against the ropes. The rough twine bites into my skin, but I don’t care. I have to get free.

Have to find Takeshi. Have to—

“KAT!”

Takeshi’s voice is so close that it stops Jin mid-stride as he marches away from me. My heart races as the madman turns, his head tipped, as if he’s

listening, gauging direction.

“KATARINA!” Takeshi roars again, even closer.

Suddenly, through the gaps in the low hedge, I see Takeshi step from the shadows. His broad shoulders are tense, a grim, cold expression on his beautifully vicious face. But just as my heart lurches and soars in hope, it suddenly crashes to the ground as horror claws into me.

Because that’s when I see Jin.

He’s moving toward Takeshi, his footsteps noiseless as he comes up behind him.

No.

No.

NO.

The ropes bite into my wrists, turning the skin raw as I twist and pull against them. Every fiber of my being screams to move, to act, but I can’t. I’m trapped here behind the hedge while the man I love is *right in front of me*, heedless of the jaws of a monster about to snap shut on him.

I watch as Takeshi’s shoulders tense, the moonlight cutting sharp angles across his face, his dark eyes scanning the clearing for danger. He doesn’t hear Jin. He doesn’t see the shadow creeping up behind him, silent and patient, a blade glinting in its hand.

My heart slams against my ribs, panic flooding through me. I thrash against the ropes, but they hold fast. My breath comes in sharp, ragged gasps as my mind screams the warning that my larynx is unable to utter.

Turn around. Please, Takeshi. Turn the fuck *around.*

Jin’s steps are measured and predatory, his movements fluid and deadly. The blade in his hand catches the faint gleam of moonlight, and my chest tightens like it's held in a vice.

My throat clenches as I strain against the silence that has bound me for years. I push, clawing at the invisible walls that have kept me voiceless for

so long. The words are right there but are stuck in my throat, suffocating me.

Takeshi. Takeshi, please. Please, hear me.

My entire body trembles, as if I'm trying to lift an impossible weight. The pressure builds, a crackling tension that threatens to break me wide open. My lips part, but no sound comes, only a shuddering gasp that burns like fire in my lungs.

Jin takes another step closer, his blade poised for the kill. My vision blurs with tears of frustration, my whole world dissolving into pain and desperation. Then something inside me snaps, a fissure appearing in the silence that has defined me for a decade.

…And then it bursts open, like a volcanic eruption.

"TAKESHI!"

The word tears from my throat, my voice like a thunderclap.

"TAKESHI, BEHIND YOU!"

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TAKESHI

“TAKESHI!”

My name.

Her voice. I've never heard it properly, but I know instinctively.

The whole world goes still.

“TAKESHI, BEHIND YOU!”

I whirl just as Jin swings his katana toward me, its steel glinting in the pale moonlight. I lurch back, the edge of the blade slicing across my chest. Pain explodes through me as a red mist sprays the air.

My finger squeezes the trigger of my gun. The sound is deafening as the bullet thunders through the clearing.

Jin doubles over, his eyes bulging as he clutches his stomach, blood gushing through his fingers.

He snarls, his eyes wild with rage and madness. He jerks upright robotically, heedless of the fact that he’s just been gut shot as he swings again. The hilt of his katana smashes into my hand, sending the gun flying from my grip.

My balance falters, and we both crash to the ground as Katarina’s screams slice through the chaos.

Through the haze of pain, I see her struggling to rise from where she's tied to a stone bench. Her hair is wild, her face pale and etched with terror. Her eyes stab into mine as I’m hit again with a realization that punches through my core.

She said my name.

I heard her voice.

Jin groans, rolling onto his side, his gaze landing on Katarina. His face contorts in a mix of sorrow and fury. “*Marianna*,” he chokes. “You… You betrayed me…?”

His body trembles as he drags himself forward, clutching his katana. “All these years,” he whispers, “and you choose another over me?”

“*No*!” I growl, dragging myself to my knees despite the fire searing my chest. Blood slicks my skin, but I don’t care. “AKIRA!”

He freezes, slowly turning to look at me.

“*Takeshi*?” he murmurs, his voice soft and uncertain, the recognition dawning in his wild eyes unable to erase the madness.

“Yes, it’s me, *Akira*,” I grit, forcing myself to stand. My head swims, my vision blurs, but I hold my ground. “You don’t want to do this.”

His body sags for a moment, but then his grip tightens on the hilt of the katana and his gaze swings back to Katarina. “She betrayed me,” he whispers, his voice breaking. “I loved her first, Tak! She was *mine*! And then she married my fucking brother! She bore his child—”

“That isn’t Marianna!” I roar brutally. “That’s Katarina. *My wife*!”

Jin shakes his head, his face twisting in denial. “You don’t understand,” he mutters. “She… She brings the madness to me. I have to end it. I have to end *her*.”

“No!” I bellow, stumbling forward as he starts crawling to Katarina. She struggles against the ropes, her face horrified.

“Akira, stop!” My voice cracks as desperation claws at me. “I love her. Do you hear me? I fucking love her. I love you too, like a brother—but I swear to God, I’ll run you through before I let you hurt her.”

He pauses for a moment, then shakes his head again. “You don’t understand,” he mutters quietly, resuming his slow crawl. “This has to end.”

I stagger after him, my vision tunneling as my loss of blood takes its toll. My legs feel like lead, but I force them to move. “Akira, stop!” I shout hoarsely. “Don’t make me do this.”

He doesn’t listen.

I manage to reach him, planting a boot on his back and shoving him down. “Stop. Moving,” I growl raggedly. He writhes beneath me, his hands scrabbling at the ground. I stomp on them, drawing a cry of pain from his lips before I reach down and yank the katana away.

“Takeshi,” he groans. “We’re brothers. You wouldn’t—”

“*Stop. Moving*,” I repeat, touching the tip of the katana to the back of his neck.

My hands tremble, my chest heaving. For all he’s done, threatening and hurting Katarina, I don’t want to kill him.

…But I will.

“Akira—”

He stiffens. Slowly, his hand drifts down to his waistband. I see the butt of a gun sticking out of it, see his hand moving toward it. My jaw grits.

“*Don’t make me kill my brother, Akira.*”

His hand keeps drifting toward the gun.

My own hand tightens on the katana, preparing to jam it through the back of his neck, not wanting to do it despite everything.

A shot rings out, sharp and final. Jin’s body jerks and slumps to the ground, motionless.

I whirl, my heart hammering. Kolya stands a few yards away, his gun still raised, his face grim and resolute. “Yes, he was your friend,” Kolya says quietly, his voice low. “But he was *my* brother. That’s my burden to carry forever.”

“Papa!!”

Katarina’s voice shatters the silence. Kolya’s face snaps to hers, his eyes widening in shock.

“*Kat…?*”

He rushes forward, holstering his gun and pulling a knife from his belt to cut her free. They cling to each other, Katarina sobbing into his chest as he holds her, tears streaming down his face.

Then she pulls away, her eyes locking on mine. Wordlessly, she scrambles to her feet and rushes toward me. I stagger, the world tilting as the adrenaline starts to fade.

“Kat,” I choke out, my knees buckling as she reaches me. “Kat, I—”

“*Takeshi*,” she sobs, her arms wrapping around me as she crashes into me. I hold her close, sagging in her embrace as my pulse thrums weakly.

She looks up at me, her eyes shimmering with tears as she cradles my face in her hands,.

“*I love you*,” she whispers, her voice fragile but steady, like the first bud of spring breaking through the frost.

If it all went silent again right now, it’d be okay.

I got to hear her say it, even just once.

“I love you too,” I murmur, my voice cracking as I press my forehead to hers, letting the world fall away until it’s just us, breathing in the same broken rhythm.

“*I love you*.”

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EPILOGUE

KATARINA

Three Months Later:

IMPOSSIBLE.

It can’t be.

I stare, my breath shallow and uneven. My legs feel like they’re going to give out from under me.

This doesn’t make sense.

My heart races, hammering against my ribs. Slowly, I stand and begin to pace the length of the bedroom in the guest house—the only livable part of the sprawling mansion formerly belonging to Miyamoto Katō that Takeshi and I now call home while the rest of the place undergoes renovations.

No. This has to be a mistake.

The sound of the front door opening pulls me from my confused thoughts. “Kat?” Takeshi calls out, his rough and deep voice instantly grounding me.

I suck in a breath, gripping the edge of the sink. “Coming!” I call back, trying to steady the quaver in my voice.

My voice.

Three months later, I’m still getting used to the concept of *having* a voice again, never mind the sound of it.

Personally, I think I sound ridiculous. But I don’t really care: I’m just happy to be able to speak again. And Takeshi tells me *everyone* thinks the sound of their own voice is weird.

He’s in the kitchen when I come downstairs, shrugging off his leather jacket and tossing it over the back of a chair. His knuckles are bruised, faint streaks of blood staining the skin.

“Tough day at the office?” I smirk, leaning against the doorway.

He grins. “Eh, nothing I couldn’t handle.”

I arch a quizzical brow. “I thought you were…hands-off these days.”

With the Ishida-kai and the Mori-kai now firmly allied, and almost all of Tokyo under our shared control, the days of Takeshi being a knuckle-busting enforcer are meant to be over. He’s *supposed* to be more of a behind-the-scenes, sit-in-an-office type now.

But I suppose that’s like telling Furrcules that he’s supposed to stay a cub forever.

You know, impossible. I still need to figure out what I'm going to do when the little fuzzball grows up.

“Tak…”

He rolls his eyes.

“I know. But trust me, this guy had it coming.”

“Uh-huh,” I say dryly. “Please, tell me more.”

He sighs, running a hand through his hair. “You know, I think I liked it better when you couldn’t talk back.”

I roll my eyes, stepping closer to swat his shoulder lightly. “Asshole.”

He laughs, pulling me into his arms. I kiss him deeply, letting the warmth of his presence steady the chaos swirling inside me. His hands tighten around

my waist, and just as he starts to pull back, I hold him there, deepening the kiss even more.

When I finally pull away, his gaze is full of the familiar fire. “Not that I’m complaining, but what was that all about?” he asks, giving me a lopsided grin.

“Just that the days of silence are over,” I say, my voice soft.

“I’m well aware,” he grins, leaning close, his lips by my ear. “And I *do* love the way you break the silence when I’ve got your legs around my waist…”

I blush fiercely, biting my lip. Part of me *really* wants to tell him to take me to the bedroom right now—or to the fucking kitchen counter, for that matter.

But this can’t wait.

I bite my lip, nervousness twisting my stomach. “No, I mean… It’s going to get a lot louder around here.”

He groans, leaning back against the counter. “*Tell* me about it. Your father, Nina, Ryu, and my family are all on their way for dinner, and I just got off the phone with Hana. Damian just landed, and you *know* that fucker is loud as—”

“Takeshi,” I interrupt.

His eyes snap to mine.

I reach into my pocket and pull out the little plastic stick, holding it out for him to see.

His grin fades, replaced by a look of shock. “What…?” he chokes, his voice cracking.

“I’m…*pregnant*,” I say softly.

Even saying it out loud for the first time, it doesn’t feel real.

Or possible.

For a moment, he just stares at the test, his face a mix of disbelief and awe. Then he exhales sharply, raking his hands through his hair. “But—” He stops, his voice trembling as he takes a step closer. “*How*? I thought the doctors said—”

“I guess they were wrong,” I choke.

“You’re sure?!” he blurts, his eyes wide.

I nod, tears pooling in my eyes. “Hundred percent.”

His hands are on me in an instant, pulling me close as his lips crash to mine. It’s not a gentle kiss; it’s fierce, raw, full of love and a thousand other unspoken emotions.

When he finally pulls back, his hands cup my face, his eyes searching mine. “I love you,” he whispers, his voice rough with emotion.

“And I love you too,” I choke out, my tears spilling over.

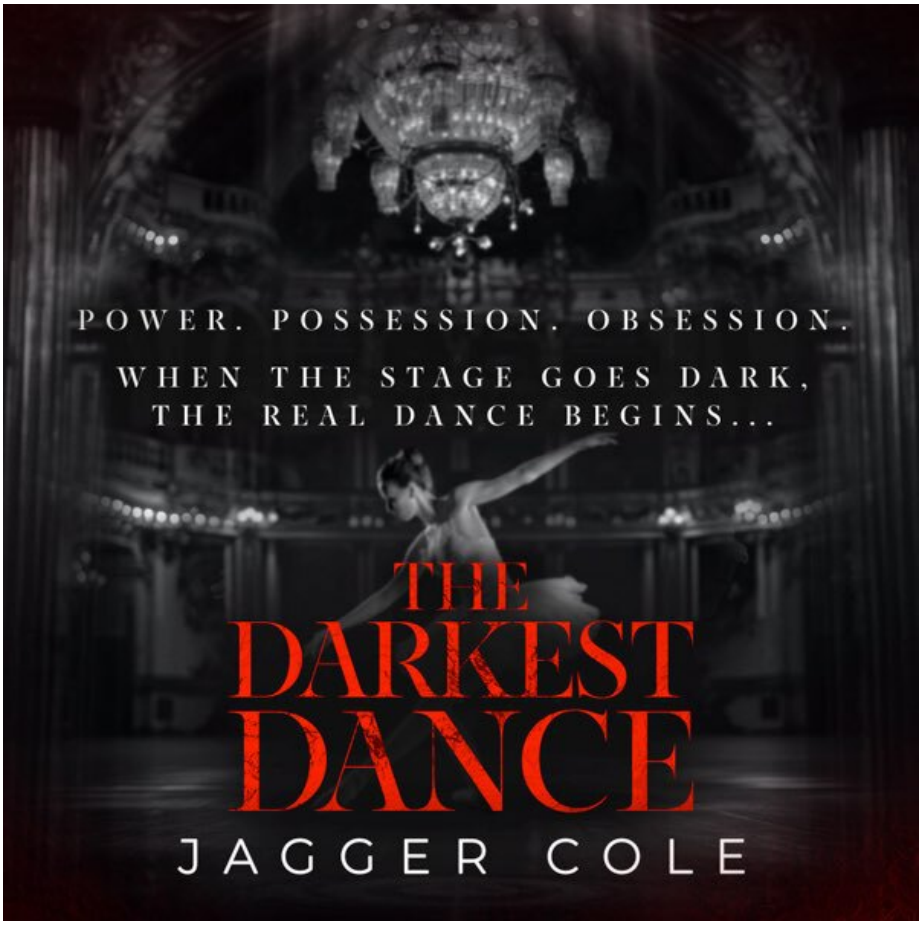
His forehead presses to mine, and for a moment, the world fades away. It’s just us, standing in a house that barely feels like home yet, holding onto each other like we’re the only things keeping the universe from unraveling.

He presses a hand to my stomach, his touch gentle and reverent. “Our family,” he murmurs, his voice filled with wonder. “Holy fuck, we’re going to have a family. I'm going to be a fucking *father*.”

He'll be a wonderful one. And in that moment, with his arms around me and the future stretching out before us, I know that everything is going to be okay.

* * *

The Jagger Cole Bookverse will continue with The Darkest Dance series, beginning with *Dance of Deception*, coming March 13th.



Haven’t gotten enough of Takeshi and Katarina?
Get their extra scene here, or type this link into your browser:
https://BookHip.com/VPQZFHM

This isn’t an epilogue or continuation to *Emperor of Havoc*. But this extra hot “follow-up” story is guaranteed to keep the spice going.

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DEVIANT HEARTS

Thank you so much for reading *Emperor of Havoc*! If you enjoyed the book, I'd be incredibly grateful if you could leave a review!

As mentioned, the Jagger Cole universe continues with The Darkest Dance series, beginning with *Dance of Deception*. You can also get a glimpse of some of the other characters mentioned in this book (the Drakos and Kildare families) in the Dark Hearts series, starting with *Deviant Hearts*, a dark enemies-to-lovers, forced marriage mafia romance. There's even a sneak peek of that book on the following pages for you.

You can find complete book lists and suggested reading orders on my website.
www.jaggercolewrites.com

Scroll on for a sneak peek of *Deviant Hearts*.

* * *

Chapter 1
Neve

Fuck. Me.

He’s doing it.

Again.

I tell myself not to look. I tell myself to keep my eyes on the book and the study notes in front of me, because NYU seriously *does not care* what my last name is, and they’ll have no issue failing my sorry ass from my government and public policy master’s program if I don’t focus.

I tell myself it’s high time I bought some fucking curtains, so I can avoid this…*distraction.*..since it’s clearly shaping up to be a frequent thing.

But the problem with telling yourself not to do something that deep down you *really* want to?

The “deep down” part always wins. *Always*.

Or, at least it does with me. Which might say more about me and my own self-control…or lack thereof.

No. It’s definitely easier to go ahead and blame my new neighbor across the street. Let’s go with that.

I mean, *he’s* the one that keeps walking around naked in a penthouse made out of fucking *glass*.

Mark Twain once said, “There is a charm about the forbidden that makes it unspeakably desirable.” But, smart as he was, it’s clear Mr. Twain never had the neighbor I do. If he had, I’m pretty sure he’d have taken a whole lot of the whimsical “charm” out of that statement.

And sure enough, despite my best—or, okay, let’s be real, *mediocre*—efforts, soon enough, my gaze shifts from the notes in front of me to the man across the steel canyon from me.

Sweet Jesus.

He’s a freaking *god*. Tall and lean, and as muscled as a superhero. Shoulders and arms built to take away your ability to speak. Chiseled abs and those grooved hip-muscle things that I don’t even know what they’re called but they seem to be evolution’s way of making even smart women go fucking stupid.

Tattoos for days. Deeply tanned, Mediterranean skin, with a shadow on his razor-sharp jaw, and dark, *perfectly* tousled hair.

It's like living next to a goddamn Avenger who models for Armani while he's not busy saving the world from Thanos. No wonder he seems to have a problem with wearing clothes.

Heat floods my cheeks as I glance across the chasm between us. The morning light streams right through his penthouse, which is another annoyance.

Two months ago, my place was a dream apartment. A modern, light-filled loft at the top of a thirty-eight-story building. So high up that I didn't even have neighbors who could see into this place.

Is it more than a little ostentatious? Well…*yeah*. It's a thousand square feet of modern glass and steel on the West Side overlooking the Hudson. Was it absurdly expensive? Also, yeah. But there's gotta be *some* perks that come with being a Kildare to offset the downsides.

Issues making friends my entire life because my family is the Irish Mafia? Check. Problems having any sort of romantic relationships, for the same reason? Check and double check.

Aimless, drifting, utterly unsure of what I want to do with my life, because what exactly *do* mafia princesses do all day?

Check and fucking mate.

For the last year, I've been throwing myself into this government and policy master's program at NYU. But after that? Who knows. For now, I'm at least finally living on my own.

But life still sort of feels just like something I'm drifting through.

Truth be told, I was pretty sure my uncle Cillian was going to shut down my plans of finally moving out of the main family house and into this place. Especially with all the violence and upheaval in the last few months as the fighting between the Irish Kildare and Greek Drakos families escalated to world-war-three levels.

But my dream apartment and the building itself are incredibly secure and easy to defend. Especially when there's a rotating crew of four Kildare guys constantly guarding the lobby—much, I'm sure, to the chagrin of the other tenants.

Yet that whole "dream apartment" thing quickly lost some of its luster when they completed construction on the building across the street, next to mine. The building with the double-height glass penthouse that rises two floors *above* my thirty-eighth-floor apartment, that now blocks part of my view of the river.

His glass penthouse.

The man with the god-like body and the aversion to clothing. The man with the sensual tattoos and the swarthy, lean look of a Trojan warrior.

The man I have absolutely *no* business gawking at and thinking these sort of sinful thoughts about. Not just because it makes me a spying creep. But because he's a man I should have every reason in the world to hate.

He's not just my neighbor.

He's the *enemy*.

But try telling that to my under-satisfied libido and clenched thighs.

At last he moves from where he's been standing at the windows staring out at the Hudson with a cup of coffee in his hand and, mercifully, disappears from view.

Finally.

Distraction gone, I manage to pull my attention back to the study notes in front of me. Nina Simone croons over the sound system as I lose myself in the books. But a handful of minutes later, movement at my peripheral vision drags my eyes back up again. He's back. And wonder of wonders, he's dressed—in an impeccably-tailored dark suit. I yank my eyes back to my notes, then back to him.

This time, he's finally gone.

I exhale slowly, swallowing as I drag my attention back to my government policy books. I don't have time for these distractions. Not when I've got two weeks of notes to memorize and *also* a Kildare family meeting in…

I glance at my phone and groan.

Shit. In, basically, now. As if on cue, the buzzer goes off for my front door. Sighing, I close the books and pad across the living room. I glance through the peephole out of habit. Then I grin and open the door wide.

Eilish's brows furrow as she looks me up and down.

"Neve, what the fuck. We're going to be late, and you're not even dressed?"

My brow scrunches as I glance down at myself.

"You need to get *dressed*, Neve," my younger sister sighs.

"I'm dressed!"

"Those look like pajamas."

"So? They're comfy." I raise my gaze past her to the tall guy standing behind her. "Cas, back me up here."

But Castle just shakes his sandy blonde head and lifts a muscled shoulder apologetically.

"Cillian wants you dressed properly, kid."

I roll my eyes at the word kid, but I let it go. Castle's been Eilish's and my —I suppose the word is "bodyguard"—for the last ten years. Growing up, all of our friends drooled over the six-and-a-half-foot tall, built-like-a-quarterback shadow that was always with us. That, or they were *sure* one of us was going to get scandalously tangled up in some steamy, x-rated tryst with him.

But, *no way*. No way to an "eww" degree. Yes, Castle is ridiculously handsome. But to Eilish and me he's always been the older brother we never had. And we're the perpetually annoying-but-loveable kid sisters *he* never had.

Which is why he can still get away with calling me “kid” or doing annoying big brother-type shit like messing up my hair even though I’m twenty-four.

I stick my bottom lip out, giving Castle my best puppy-dog eyes.

“But *Caaaastle*—”

“Enough with the waif eyes. Go get changed, Neve,” he grunts. “Your uncle isn’t exactly one to mince words, and he wants you dressed up.”

“But *why*? What’s this meeting even about?”

Eilish shrugs. “Beats me. Bet it has something to do with your new neighbor, though.”

Annoyed as I am to be forced to give up my sweatpants and hoodie, I know Castle well enough to know there’s no way he’s budging on this. And I know my Uncle Cillian well enough to know that one, there’s no wiggle room here, but more importantly two, there’s a reason he wants us looking sharp. Even if I have no idea what that reason is.

I root around in my disaster zone of a bedroom, stripping out of my hoodie and sweats and pulling on clean underwear and clothes. Five minutes later, I emerge in a green puff-sleeve top, black jeans, and heeled black boots, shoving my long red hair up in a loose ponytail.

Eilish, predictably, rolls her eyes.

“*That’s* dressed up?”

“I could go back to my extensive sweatpants collection, if you prefer.”

Eilish sighs, reaching up to smooth the single errant lock of blonde back behind her ear. She’s right. I’m still fairly casually dressed. Especially next to my princess of a little sister, who looks like a modern-day blonde Jackie-O in a pink Chanel jersey dress and heels, her hair and makeup immaculate. At *nine-thirty in the freaking morning*, no less. So sue me, this is the best I can do.

Finally, she grins as she rolls her eyes again.

“Okay, *okay*, fine. C’mon. We shouldn’t be late.”

“Hey, I’m not the one getting bent out of shape about the dress code.”

I glance to Castle for at least a chuckle. But he’s looking even more grim and stoic than usual.

“What’s up with you?”

He shrugs, turning away.

“Just don’t want to be late. C’mon.”

I frown. “Cas, seriously, what’s up?”

There’s a glint in his eye when he glances back at me for half a second. But still, he gives nothing away.

“Let’s get where we need to go, kid,” he murmurs quietly.

I shoot Eilish a puzzled look as we follow him out the door. But she just shakes her head and gives me an “I have no idea” face. Given that my sister is incapable of being anything but cheerful, talking shit about *anyone* no matter how terrible they are, or lying in any capacity, it’s clear she’s also in the dark.

Twenty minutes later, Castle is pulling the white armored Range Rover up to the curb outside O’Bannon’s. The midtown Irish pub has been our uncle’s temporary center of business and war room since he moved to New York from London a few months ago, after the petty scuffles between the Kildare family and the Drakos family turned into all-out war.

After things went nuclear, when the Drakos family lost Vasilis, their head of operations in New York, and we lost Declan, the head of ours.

Declan, as in, *my father*.

The side door to O’Bannon’s, which leads up to the second floor where Cillian’s been holding court the last few months, is guarded by four Kildare men with not-so-hidden bulges of sidearms under their dark jackets. One nods stiffly at Castle and goes to open the door to the bar for us, when suddenly there’s the sound of a car screeching to a stop at the curb behind us.

The hairs on the back of my neck start to prickle as I slowly turn to frown at the black Escalade. And when the back door opens, and a man in a dark suit with pure malice on his face steps out, my heart leaps into my throat.

"*RUN*!" I scream as I grab Eilish's arm, whirling to bolt into O'Bannon's before the bullets start flying.

Because I know damn well who the man who just stepped out of the SUV is. Hades Drakos: a dangerous, certifiable psychopath and second-in-command of the Drakos family. Basically, public enemy number two if your last name is Kildare.

As I yank my sister towards the door, I realize something odd: the guards aren't launching into action. Castle himself is just standing there, glowering at the second-oldest Drakos brother as he grins savagely at me.

"Cas?" I hiss hoarsely, my pulse thudding. Clearly, Eilish is just as out of the loop as I am, because she's still cowering behind me, shaking.

"It's okay, kid," Castle mutters quietly. He glances behind me, his look softening as it frequently does when it comes to Eilish. Which is totally understandable. I'm the sister with a chip on her shoulder and an axe to grind. Eilish is the sweet one. The one who's arguably *way* too soft for this dangerous world that we live in.

"But that's—!"

"*Boo*," Hades chuckles thinly, winking at me in a way that sends a shiver up my spine. He rolls his muscled shoulders, the tattoo ink that curls up from inside the collar of his dress shirt rippling as he buttons his jacket.

"Well, Pillow Fort. Can we go inside now?"

The creases in Castle's brow deepen as he squares off with Hades.

"It's Castle."

"I really don't give a shit. Are we doing this or not?"

I frown as I turn to Castle again.

"Doing *what*, Cas? What are we—"

“Open the doors.”

I stiffen at the deep, powerful voice that rumbles behind me. A voice that causes a tingling sensation to creep over my skin, electrifying me as deeply as it scares me. The feeling grows and throbs deeper and warmer, until I can feel my cheeks reddening as something wicked pools between my thighs.

I turn, and my core clenches tight.

It’s *him*.

My neighbor. The forbidden distraction. The man with the god-like body built for sin who I have no business fantasizing about, but God help me I do.

Because my neighbor isn’t just eye candy.

He’s *Ares fucking Drakos*, the brand-new king of the entire Drakos family.

I’m vaguely aware of more people getting out of a second and a third SUV that pull up behind the first—the other siblings in the Drakos family, and various other guards. As the seconds tick by, and as Ares’ piercing, dark-eyed gaze continues to stab right into me, the question of why he’s here fades into the background.

And the question of why he’s looking at me like he’s trying to figure out how to swallow me in one bite comes to the fore.

“Inside, all of you,” he growls quietly, his voice filled with unquestioned power. Two of his three brothers—Hades and Kratos—and his sister Calliope glance at me with slightly raised eyebrows as they file past me into O’Bannon’s. Their guards and the Kildare men follow.

Castle clears his throat, taking Eilish by the shoulders as if to escort her inside. I know I should go too. But somehow, I’m stuck. It’s as if my gaze is bound to Ares. Or as if *his* gaze has me pinned to the very pavement beneath my feet.

We’re on a busy New York sidewalk. And yet, it’s as if we’re suddenly in a bubble of silence. As if the entire rest of the world fades away to a low

hum, until I can actually hear my throat tightening when he starts to walk towards me.

I shiver when he stops right in front of me, looming over me. I want to sneer at him. Or spit on his fancy shoes. Or worse. But all I can do is purse my lips and glare at him.

Ares smirks down into my eyes.

“They haven’t told you yet, have they?”

I swallow.

“Told me *what*?”

One of his dark brows raises in amusement.

“Never mind. You’ll find out soon enough. You know who I am?”

“Of course I know who you are.”

“I mean, apart from being your neighbor.”

I stiffen, desperately trying to swallow back the heat from my face.

“Neighbor?” My voice cracks. Not badly, but enough. “I hadn’t realized.”

The dangerous and lethally-attractive man looming over me smiles ruthlessly, coldly.

“You don’t recognize me?”

“I—I guess not.”

“Would it help if I took my clothes off?”

Dear. GOD.

My face turns as hot as the sun as I pray for a sinkhole to open at my feet.

“I—I—”

“The meeting is about to start.”

He lets his lips curl slightly, giving me the faintest flash of white teeth. Then, without blinking, he starts to move past where I'm still glued to the sidewalk.

He pauses right next to me, and my breath sucks in as he leans down, so close I can smell the woodsy, elegant scent of his cologne and feel the heat of his breath in my ear.

"Oh, and Neve…" he growls quietly. "Peach isn't your color."

My brows knit as I start to turn towards him in confusion.

"I'm not wearing—"

Oh God.

Yes, I am.

My mind flashes back to rooting around in my light-filled bedroom as I yanked off my hoodie and sweatpants. Where I pulled out the green top and black jeans…

After putting on the laundry-day pair of peach-colored panties.

I'm not the only person spying on their neighbor.

Son of a bitch.

Ares clears his throat, straightening up and buttoning his jacket as I melt into a puddle of mortification.

"See you in there, princess."

Chapter 2
Ares

Uneasy lies the head that wears the crown.

Everyone knows that. Except kings usually know they're going to *be* kings long before they take over the throne. They prepare for it their whole lives, train for it. They're ready when the day arrives.

I wasn't. Because I was never *meant* to be king. I'm Lancelot, burning and pillaging and fucking his way through the countryside. *Not* King fucking Arthur.

But life, or fate, or karma, or whatever you want to call it, had other plans for me.

Nine months ago, my father Aeneas, the head of the entire Drakos Family, died at the hands of my older brother, Atlas. My father was a hard, brutal man. But Atlas was unhinged. And power-hungry.

Not to mention a knuckle-dragging fucking idiot.

His "reign" lasted less than three weeks. Then he was killed waging a pointless war against a man with deep pockets and dangerous friends, all over a woman.

It's an absurd story. Years and years ago, Atlas had once been betrothed to this woman's mother, Saoirse —an Irish Mafia princess and Cillian Kildare's sister. But Saoirse ended up having a fling with someone else, producing a daughter, Rose—who went on to end up with this man with the deep pockets and dangerous friends.

Atlas decided the daughter of the bride he'd been cheated out of should be his. Obviously, the man with whom she lived and shared a bed disagreed. And when the dust had settled, my brother was dead, and I was king in his place.

Sometimes I'm convinced life really is a Greek tragedy.

Or a comedy, depending on how cynical you are.

But, heavy as the burden to lead is, I was born for this. All my siblings and I were. Living under our father's rule may have been a lesson in brutality and viciousness, but it hardened us. It prepared us to lead and to conquer. When I took the throne that was unexpectedly thrust upon me, I was ready.

And then, of course, life threw me another curveball.

My siblings and I were all born here in New York. But my father ultimately preferred England, where he'd grown up. So that's where the real seat of the

Drakos empire was for the last twelve years, while my uncle Vasilis oversaw our operations back here in New York City.

Until four months ago, when, as I say, the proverbial shit hit the proverbial fan.

Our family and the Irish Kildare family have never gotten along. There's generations of bad blood between us, going back who even remembers how long. At one point, there was at least a half-truce—when Saoirse was promised to Atlas. And even when that marriage fell through, things at least cooled off between our families for the next twenty years or so.

Until things went sideways, *badly*.

I've heard it started as a potential peace agreement. Vasilis sat down with Declan Kildare, Cillian's half-brother and the head of Kildare operations here in New York. But whatever "peace" they were trying to hammer out shattered when a gunfight broke out between them, killing them both.

It should mean all-out war. A bloodbath in the streets. The final showdown between the Kildare and Drakos families until only one is left standing.

Luckily, neither Cillian nor I is suicidal.

Cillian *is* a fucking psychopath, there's no question about that. He's been described more than once as the kind of man who wants to watch the world burn because he enjoys the smell of the smoke. And I think that's a fair assessment. But either out of self-interest or greed, we've managed to work out an arrangement.

It's time to settle this bullshit between our families once and for all.

And the key to settling it is currently glaring daggers at me from across the room. Clearly, nobody's told her yet. But she's it.

We're it.

My eyes narrow, my mouth tightening to a line as I let my gaze drag across the scowl on Neve Kildare's face.

It makes sense that she hates me. Even if neither of us had anything to do with the violence of a few months ago, at the end of the day, my uncle and

her father killed each other. From what I gather, neither she nor her sister Eilish was very close with Declan.

But still. Blood is blood.

And soon, *we'll* be blood.

Joined.

Bound together forever.

My jaw grinds as my mind flashes to other more literal ways I could bind the stunning and furious-looking redhead across the table from me.

My tempting, sinfully attractive neighbor who *really* ought to have some curtains put up in her bedroom.

The one who's been spying on me. The one *I've* been spying on right back. I'm just much better at it than she is.

Desire makes my cock swell as my mind flashes back to earlier today. When I was standing in my kitchen rinsing out my coffee cup, staring through the windows above my sink…

Into her *bedroom*. Where I watched her strip off her sweatpants and hoodie and prowl naked around her disaster of a room until she found some other clothes to pull on—

"You realize she's going to bite your dick off the first chance she gets, right?"

My jaw grinds and my train of thought is interrupted as I glance sideways at my younger brother, Hades, sitting next to me on our side of the conference table.

When we were kids, I used to roll my eyes at the way our father named all of us after Greek gods, titans, and muses—Atlas, Ares, Hades, Deimos, Kratos, and our sister, Calliope. But as we've gotten older, we've all weirdly grown into the mythological figures we were named for. Hades especially.

There’s a darkness and an edge in all of us—our father made damn sure of that with his heavy hand and strict discipline. But Hades—named for the god of the dead, the king of the underworld—always seems to revel in it. The sadistically sociopathic glint I can currently see in his eyes is a testament to that darkness.

He shrugs at my cold silence.

“You know I’m right.”

“What I know is this is neither the time nor the place, Hades,” I grunt back.

My brother shrugs again, pushing his longish hair back from his face. He got our mother’s piercing ice-blue eyes. I got our father’s dark, brooding ones.

Behind him and towering above all of us despite being younger than Hades and me, Kratos mimics my stern glare at our brother.

“It’s a good arrangement,” he rumbles in that mountainous way of his.

I nod to my brother. Kratos is a good, steady voice of reason. Though Deimos, who’s holding down the fort back in London, is the true peacekeeper of all of us siblings.

A peacekeeper in the style of a nuclear deterrent, that is, not Gandhi.

“Oh, I agree,” Hades smiles brittly. “It’s good for peace and will bring an end to bloodshed. I mean, it’s not *my* cock that’s going to get chewed off.”

“Could you *attempt* to not be a dick for just two minutes, Hades?”

I turn to smirk quietly at Calliope, my sharp-tongued little sister, sitting on my other side. The youngest and smallest of all of us, and yet somehow, she’s the law-keeper. She’s got our grandmother Dimitra’s genes.

Across the room, the group of Kildare men who’ve been talking quietly amongst themselves finally come find seats at the table. Cillian and I catch each other’s eyes, and we nod.

This wasn’t his idea, or mine. It was Dimitra who first put it forward: a way to put the hostilities between our families and our subsidiaries behind us for

good. As she pointed out, the closest we've ever gotten to peace before was when Atlas was set to marry Saoirse.

What better way to settle our differences than by becoming family?

But when I glance at Neve sitting across the table, still glaring pure malice at me, it's clear her uncle still hasn't told her what's about to happen.

This should be interesting.

Cillian clears his throat, sitting back in his seat as his green eyes slice across the room, silencing it with a look.

"I'm not one for fancy speeches, so I'll get straight to it. We're here because the hostilities between our organizations have reached an untenable level. Rivalries are one thing. But we've crossed too many lines, and there's too much blood in the streets."

He pulls a silver cigarette case out of his breast pocket, opens it, slips one between his lips, and lights it deftly with a flick of a silver Zippo. Smoke curls around the Irishman's head as his glinting green eyes pierce through it.

"I'm not going to get all weepy and sentimental. The truth is, the reason all of us are here is that war will mean ruin to both the Kildare and Drakos families. It will destroy our business interests. And there are already enough jackals circling, waiting for the first sign of weakness to strike. The Bolinaro Cartel. The Carveli Family. The Reznikov Bratva, not to mention their allies."

Cillian's icy gaze lands on me.

I don't blink.

"So in the interest of *not* getting hit from behind by an enemy while we bicker like schoolboys, Ares and I have come to an arrangement—one that will end these hostilities forever, and make both of our families stronger than ever as a united front."

I watch Neve's face scrunch up in confusion as she turns to frown at her uncle.

Oh, this is about to get good.

“A *united* front?”

Goddamnit, Ezio.

I frown quietly as I lean forward, turning to stab my gaze down the length of the table to where Ezio Adamos is glaring daggers at Cillian.

“Please, *go on* about this fucking *united* front we’re supposed to have with—”

“Ezio.”

My voice is neither raised nor very forceful. But it cuts through the room all the same, quickly silencing him. He stares at me, fury and pain boiling behind his eyes.

The Adamos family is a subsidiary, tributary family to ours. Their allegiance has been pledged to the Drakos family for generations, and the way I can see Ezio about to suicide bomb this entire discussion has my jaw grinding harshly.

But I get it. And I feel for him.

Ezio’s only son, Jason, was at the meeting where Vasilis Drakos and Declan Kildare opened fire.

He was also killed.

“Ares, *please*,” he hisses at me, pain glinting in his eyes. “You cannot seriously be considering allying ourselves with these backstabbing, honorless *Micks*—”

“*Be silent*,” I snap.

I’m not completely heartless. I understand he’s in pain. But this is decidedly *not* the place for it. Or the time for him to start hurling slurs.

Cillian clears his throat, eying Ezio across the table.

“What would…*ease* your grief?”

Fuck.

This isn’t Cillian being diplomatic.

This is him going for the throat, and Ezio’s about to walk right into his trap.

“What would *ease my fucking grief*?!” He snaps at the Irishman.

“I don’t believe I stuttered, Mr. Adamos. What’s the going rate on grief these days? Ten thousand? Twenty?”

Goddammit.

Ezio lurches to his feet, his face a mask of seething rage as he whips his head around to glare at me.

“This is insulting! I will *not* sit here—”

“Yes, you will.” My gaze hardens on him.

I’ll tell him again how sorry I am for his loss later. Not here.

“You. *Will*.”

His mouth thins to a line as he points a finger across the table at Cillian.

“This piece of shit *dares* to offer me *money*?! I lost a SON, Ares!”

“And I lost a fucking *brother*,” Cillian snaps coldly. “But here we are. And you can either get on board, or go find a nice length of rope somewhere and join your boy.”

Yeah, they’re not exaggerating when they call Cillian a sadistic sociopath.

The room goes silent. Ezio’s face turns purple. He looks like he’s seriously considering jumping across the table and murdering Cillian with his bare hands. But instead, he spins on his heel, glares at me viciously, and storms from the room.

“*Well, I have to say. This is TWICE as much fun as I imagined it would be*,” Hades mutters next to me.

Cillian sighs, drumming his fingers on the table as his gaze drags back to me.

“You need to keep your dogs on a tighter leash.”

“He’ll keep to the truce,” I growl back.

My eyes swivel to Neve again, drinking in her fiery red hair, the dusting of freckles across her nose, and the sharp green eyes so like her uncle’s, still squinting in confusion.

“And you?” I murmur, pulling my gaze from Neve to Cillian. “You’ll keep to our agreement?”

He takes a long, slow drag of his cigarette, and then nods slowly.

“We will.”

He turns to his niece, and my eyes lock onto her as well.

“Neve,” Cillian sighs. “There’s no easy way to say this. And if there was any other way…” he shrugs. “But there isn’t. Not one that doesn’t end in more blood.”

Her brow furrows deeper.

“Uncle, what are you talking about? And why am I—”

“You’re going to marry Ares Drakos, Neve. That will be the final truce to forever end this bullshit between our families.”

The room goes *silent*. Neve’s face turns white as she stares dumbfounded at her uncle. She blinks, frowning as if willing him to laugh at the spectacular joke he’s just made.

But this is no joke.

This is happening. And as reluctant and unhappy as *I* am about it, I’m guessing from the look of horror that spreads across her face that she’s twice as reluctant and unhappy.

“*What*?!”

Cillian takes one last pull from his smoke, exhaling toward the ceiling before dropping the butt in the mug of coffee in front of him.

“It’s the only way, Neve. You’re going to marry Ares, and that’s final.”

She blinks, shaking as her mouth forms silent words, none getting out.

“No—”

“I’m afraid this isn’t a discussion, Neve,” he says quietly, a flicker of regret and rare-for-Cillian apology on his face.

“Like hell it’s—!”

“*Neve*,” he growls thickly. “It’s. Been. Decided.”

Slowly, her face pale as a ghost, Neve turns to let her fierce green eyes stab into mine like knives.

I stare right back.

My little peeping Tom of a neighbor.

My enemy.

My wife.

“I think you’ll find, Neve, this is the best way to settle all of the bad blood—”

“And I think *you’ll* find yourself, *Ares*, with a knife in your throat if you come anywhere fucking near me.”

She stands abruptly, her eyes wild with fear and anger.

“Neve,” Cillian hisses quietly. “It’s *done*—”

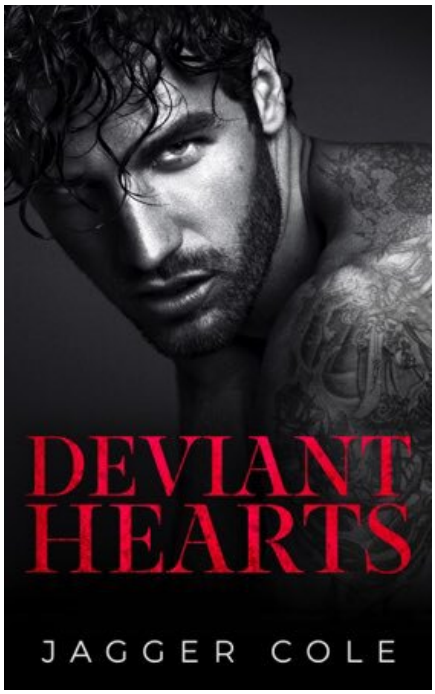
“Oh, we’re done, all right.”

Without another word, she whirls, storms to the conference room doors, and blows right through them.

Shit.

“So,” Hades sighs, his voice dripping with amusement. “You ready to discuss body armor for your dick yet, or do you wanna talk bachelor party?”

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



A reader first and foremost, Jagger Cole cut his romance writing teeth penning various steamy fan-fiction stories years ago. After deciding to hang up his writing boots, Jagger worked in advertising pretending to be Don Draper. It worked enough to convince a woman way out of his league to marry him, though, which is a total win.

Now, Dad to two little princesses and King to a Queen, Jagger is thrilled to be back at the keyboard.

When not writing or reading romance books, he can be found woodworking, enjoying good whiskey, and grilling outside - rain or shine.

You can find all of his books at
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